

The Ancient Practice of *Lectio Divina*

by Stephen J. Binz

St. Gregory the Great, in the sixth century, wrote, “The biblical Scriptures are letters from Almighty God to his creatures. The Lord of all has sent you his letters for your life’s advantage—and yet you neglect to read them eagerly. *Study* them, I beg you, and meditate daily on the words of your Creator. Learn the heart of God in the words of God” (*Letters*, 5, 46).

Reading the Bible in this way, as the Word of God expressing the heart of God, is what the ancient Church called *lectio divina*. This is what Origen meant when he wrote about *lectio divina* in the third century, and what the patristic writers in general recommended as a way of prayer. “*Lectio divina*” is a Latin word that means “divine reading” or, as it is more often translated, “spiritual reading.”

The most important foundation of this way of praying with Scripture is an understanding of the text’s inspiration. When St. Paul declared that “all Scripture is inspired by God” (2 Tm 3:16), he used the word *theopneustos* (God-breathed). The sacred text is written by the human hand but “breathed” by God. God is the primary source of Scripture, and human writers are the instrumental source.

Thus, inspiration is not only a charism given by God to the biblical writers, but it is a continuing characteristic of the biblical text. The Bible is always inspired, so whenever we take it in our hands to read, we know that God’s Spirit has been infused into the text. So the Holy Spirit within us leads us to listen, reflect, and understand deeply the inspired words given to us in Sacred Scripture.

Because the Bible is the Word of God—“letters” from God to us—our first response must be **listening** (*lectio*). We must attend carefully to the text, listening

to it “with the ear of the heart,” as recommended by St. Benedict (*Rule of St. Benedict*, Prologue). If God is indeed speaking to us through the sacred text, then we must attend to the words with a sense of expectation and let go of our own agendas. No matter how many times we may have read the passage in the past, we can expect God to offer us some new wisdom every time we read. So we must listen to the text as if for the first time, paying attention to whatever God desires for us.

Listening to the inspired Word leads us to **reflection** (*meditatio*). We want to understand the meaning of the text in the context of our lives. Because the Scriptures are Divine Revelation, they are far more than mere information. By reflecting and pondering the text, we allow the text to be an encounter with God, and we open ourselves to the deeper significance and the grace God desires for us.

Entering into this kind of meditation, we might try to place ourselves in the scene. We want to encounter God through the text with our whole selves: our minds, hearts, emotions, imaginations, and desires. Through this kind of reflection, we try to discern what God wants us to understand or experience through the sacred text.

Then, after listening to and reflecting on God’s Word, we naturally want to respond in prayer (*oratio*). Our prayer arises in our hearts as a result of having encountered God in the biblical text. As in any true communication, we listen and respond, so that a dialogue is established between God and ourselves. As St. Ambrose said, “In *lectio* we listen to God, in *oratio* we speak to God.”

Depending on what we have heard God say to us in our reflective reading, our prayers may be of praise, thanksgiving, lament, or repentance. And our prayers

are increasingly enriched because they are continually nourished by the vocabulary, images, and sentiments of the sacred texts.

Because our responses to God's Word are increasingly more personal relationships with God, our prayers then lead us to contemplation (*contemplatio*), which is resting in the presence of God. As with any relationship, words and dialogue can be sustained only for so long. In the presence of God, our prayers lead to silence.

In this silent contemplation, we open our hearts to whatever God wants to do within us. Having been fed by God's Word, we are now transformed by God's grace in the ways God knows best. A humble receptivity on our part allows God to work his transforming will within us.

Before ending our prayerful time with God's Word, we take time to move back into our active lives with awareness. We move from contemplation to **action** (*operatio*). We should consider what God wants us to do as a result of having encountered the Divine Presence in Scripture.

By allowing our lives to be gradually transformed by Scripture, we become witnesses of the Good News. The experience of *lectio divina* deepens the presence of God within us as we seek to become more like Jesus Christ. So our daily lives become more attentive, more merciful, and more purposeful.

Lectio divina is the Church's most ancient way of reading the Bible. Of course, this prayerful reading of Scripture was not called *lectio divina* until the time of the Latin Fathers, but this must have been the way that Jesus read the Scriptures of Israel: a way that he learned from the Jewish tradition. The early Christians read the Gospels in this way too, not just as a way of learning about Jesus, but as a means of forming their lives as his disciples.

The Church Fathers spoke of *lectio divina* as a way of pondering the Word of God. Origen urged his readers to study and pray God's Word, asking to be illumined by God. Jerome encouraged his audience to be fed each day with *lectio divina*. As the monastic movement developed, *lectio divina* was practiced as the daily way to communicate with God. St. Benedict established

lectio divina, along with the liturgy, at the core of his Rule. The monastic tradition encouraged this slow and thoughtful reading of Scripture and the ensuing pondering of its meaning.

Other spiritual traditions practiced *lectio divina* in a variety of ways. St. Albert stipulated that the Carmelites should ponder the Word of God day and night. St. John of the Cross urged the practice of *lectio divina* in this way: "Seek in reading and you will find in meditation; knock in prayer and it will be opened to you in contemplation" (*De officiis ministrorum* 1, 20, 88). In Dominican spirituality, listening to the Word becomes a preparation for witnessing to the Word. St. Dominic's eighth way of prayer, sitting with Scripture, leads to his ninth way of prayer, walking with Scripture. St. Ignatius of Loyola added dimensions of imagination, consolation, and discernment to *lectio divina* as he developed the Spiritual Exercises. The Society of Jesus, most commonly known as the Jesuits, teaches that *lectio divina* forms people into contemplatives in action.

In recent years, *lectio divina* has been liberated from monasteries and religious houses to become the heart of lay spirituality. In his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis recommended *lectio divina* as a "way of listening to what the Lord wishes to tell us in his word and of letting ourselves be transformed by the Spirit" (*Evangelii Gaudium*, no. 152). *Lectio divina*, he said, "consists of reading God's word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us."

Rather than keeping Scripture at a safe analytical distance, this formational reading leads us to involve ourselves intimately, openly, and receptively in what we read. Our goal is not to use the text to acquire more knowledge, or to get advice, or to form an opinion about the passage. Rather, the inspired text becomes the subject of our reading relationship, and we become the object that is acted upon and shaped by Scripture. Reading with expectation, we open ourselves so that the divine Word can address us, probe us, and form us into the image of Christ.

Although some today try to create a clear distinction between studying the Bible and prayerful reflection on Scripture, the Christian patristic writers show us that we cannot create this kind of division with the

Word of God. Whether we are studying or praying, we must be always clearing a path toward our hearts for Jesus to come. Bible study today must teach people how to listen personally to the voice of God in the inspired texts and how to seek a prayerful, contemplative, formative understanding and love for Scripture. There is no clear distinction here between study and prayer.

Lectio divina is similar to Eucharistic Communion in that, through it, Christ in a certain sense enters under our roofs, infuses our bodies and souls with his divine presence, and forms us into his own body. Pope Benedict says that “the diligent reading of Sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with

trusting openness of heart. If it is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church—I am convinced of it—a new spiritual springtime” (Address on the fortieth anniversary of *Dei Verbum*, September 16, 2005). In a vision of Ezekiel, God invites the prophet to open his mouth and eat the scroll so that he may then speak God’s Word to the people (Ez 3:1-4). Medieval writers often compared *lectio divina* with this process of eating: taking a bite (*lectio*), chewing on it (*meditatio*), delighting in its flavor (*oratio*), and then digesting it to become part of the body (*contemplatio*). I would add, finally, metabolizing the Word (*operatio*), so that it may be put to use in forms of witness and service.

This article was originally published on www.USCCB.org as part of a series for Catechetical Sunday 2016.

Copyright © 2016, Catholic News Service–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Washington DC. All rights reserved.

Excerpts from Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, copyright © 2013, Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Quote from Pope Benedict, copyright © 2005, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City State. Used with permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture excerpts used in this work are taken from the *New American Bible, rev. ed.* © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright owner.