

Centering Prayer and Lectio Divina (Part 1)

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Lectio Divina is a private devotion and while it's useful to do it in common it was originally designed to be a private experience or encounter with the scriptures.

Doing it together is a liturgy of Lectio, because you are deliberately structuring the different levels of Lectio, which is a good way to communicate it, and then sometimes you share your reflections and inspirations so it really is a real liturgy.

Primary purpose from earliest times was to sit down with the bible by yourself and listen to it rather than read it, and to say it even, aloud, and to allow the sounds of the words to penetrate you. Everything that's translated is interpreted. No language can capture fully another language. Fortunately, translation or interpretation is not the purpose fundamentally of Lectio. Its purpose is a relationship or getting acquainted episode, a deepening of our acquaintanceship into friendship and the commitment that friendship always requires that leads toward union at various levels as time goes on.

Lectio Divina as it is properly understood is a dynamic process that moves you from an awkward acquaintanceship with God to ever deepening levels of friendship, commitment and experience... and beyond experience.

Here we see our traditional four stages of Lectio, not in a hierarchical model but a circular model. These are the four moments of Lectio Divina instead of four stages and at the center the dot represents the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the dynamic source of Lectio Divina so that means that the Holy Spirit is at work in all directions.

We should always start with a prayer to the Holy Spirit to put ourselves in a position of attentiveness. Always remember that we are not just reading a book but listening to the word of God in this book; the book we believe to be divinely inspired by God. Hence, it's not our thoughts that matter or how much we read but how much we hear and how much that hearing penetrates us at every level of our being. This is the remarkable gift of Lectio Divina, unlike other methods that are aimed at a particular goal. Lectio Divina is a method less method. The same kind of method you use to get acquainted with someone who fascinates you. You don't structure a conversation with such a person.

The liturgy had this problem in the beginning of the church where the early fathers had to relate to the word of God in such a way that it could be translated into a public worship experience. This is what we are doing when we do Lectio in common. You are taking a private encounter and turning it into a worship that imposes a structure on it that is not normal in private Lectio Divina, but it is suitable for worship, or introducing how to do it, or celebrating the experience, but is not strictly Lectio Divina because it has to be unstructured.

You have to allow the spirit to lead you to read a certain amount. At any point while you're reading you might want to reflect. Stop. You don't have to finish the reading. Stop as long as your thoughts are flowing. When they start to flow they warm up the heart and we begin to feel we reach out to express to God our gratitude, our thanks or our request for the wonderful things we are reading about or which the reading of scripture is reflecting about ourselves that we want to talk to God about. This tends to conversation or to aspirations or to effusions of love and you can't do this in reading in

common.

When our response becomes frequent and is reinforced by centering prayer, which is preparing our intuitive faculties for the leap between effusions of love and reflections of love to the experience of love and it's the experiences of the word of God that is the goal of Lectio Divina and you can't control it. You can put yourself in the way; you can cultivate the means. Lectio is a marvelous means because it tries to prepare all of our faculties for union with God. You have a vast array of biblical symbols, powerful symbols; some of them are archetypes that secretly speak to the depths of our being, speak to the core of our being. If you have the code number or the infused spiritual sense of scripture you can organize material in an experiential way and not a rational, analytical or intellectual way.

The spirit bubbling up inside of us says read, respond, reflect or do all three or change them around in the same Lectio period. When it's simple enough you might slip into a moment of resting in God beyond your particular feelings and reflections.

St. Frances of de Sales says, "Once the fire gets going (responding – aspiration, love, of conversation that is effusive) if you put more logs on it you will put it out. When the fire is burning, sit down and enjoy the warmth, the light of the dancing flames. This is not a concept so much as an enjoyment of what the other acts were all about, which was to contribute an experience of the goodness, tenderness and presence of God.

Resting might only last 10 seconds or a minute or two or an hour with alternations. When it gets dim put another log on the fire, say I love you, thank you, reflect on the redemption of the Lord. It's a conversation moving towards communion. Alternations move back and forth until you are mostly communing. This can be compatible with doing a certain amount of reading but it presupposes a disposition or sensitivity to what the spirit is saying to your particular little church. It can be extremely personal. "If today you hear his voice – listen." If today you are doing Lectio Divina, you are listening to what the spirit is saying to you today, not tomorrow or next week. It's a now conversation, an encounter with the presence of God, as you are capable of experiencing it at this point in your spiritual journey.

The tradition says that the normal way we approach resting is precisely the preparation of the ordinary faculties of imagination, emotion and reflecting and to let go of those obstacles in our life that are major distractions from that project. In other words, if we are doing something in our moral life that prevents us from feeling at peace – go to confession or be sorry. Get it out of your life.

This process is dynamic. We're relating to the spirit of God from each of these levels of our being and each of them is related to each other on the circle, which is not communicated by a hierarchical diagram. Each period of Lectio Divina can begin with any one of these levels and whatever needs to be fulfilled to support a particular stage you are making use of you will be inspired to go back and fill in what was missing in either your reflecting or responding process. You can start Lectio Divina with resting, which is what you do in centering prayer. It pre-supposes that you keep up centering prayer long enough so that having tasted some of the rest centering prayer may communicate in the early days, you sense that you want to know where did this come from? What is the conceptual background for contemplation? What is centering prayer in relationship to the Christian tradition? What is it on the scale of Lectio Divina? How

does it fit in?

It is the nature of human nature if you do want more and it's good for you to have a holistic and complete preparation for the higher graces of God, which are not just rest. Rest is only the first stage of contemplative prayer, which opens out as St. Theresa points out to several different levels of rest, getting more restful all the time until you get to eternal rest.

The point is that the more intimate the experience of God, the wiser you are to prepare all your faculties to take part in the journey - your emotions, your imagination and your reflections. Scripture is an education in our ordinary human faculties for divine presence. If you go too fast and get too much of divine presence, you space out because your faculties are not adequately prepared to receive the subtle, intimate, but real experience.

Your spirit is able to handle the rich food of the divine essence. Augustine says the Eucharist is the divine milk for us to handle in this life because our stomach is too weak to handle the solid food of the divine essence. We can't sink our teeth into God in this life. That's the food of heaven. We can receive God by degrees and by more and more in the degree that your faculties can include the body; divine action works on our cells, our bodily cells, the brain, synapses, energies of the body mingle with the energies of spirit. Everything works together to provide the single eye of gospel - the simplification of all our desires to one encompassing desire without particular content for the ultimate reality of God.

On each level we have the whole circle represented. What happens is that reading predominates in the first stage as far as our psychological experience goes, but the other three are present there. As Lectio completes its dynamic process it tends to emphasize resting, resting implies varying degrees of rest and what does that do to the other stages of Lectio. This is a very important point. No matter how advanced you are - if you're spending the whole time in pure awareness and utter silence. It's the alternations that help us to grow; the movement from reading a lot to reading less and reflecting a lot, and from reflecting less and responding a lot leads to the prayer of simplicity, so that many words or aspiration are synthesized in a single phrase or word. This is a movement of grace to simplify and unite all of our faculties into the single eye of the gospel whose objective is to be completely at God's disposal, and in love with God, this is what centering prayer is totally in service of. This movement needs to fill in these other levels of human relating to God that are an important foundation for the higher graces of contemplative prayer and for the experience of continual union which is the transforming union that John of the Cross and St. Theresa talk about.

Suppose we are reading and practicing other stages of Lectio Divina. Suppose you have a moment of resting. Because this is a dynamic process you can begin anywhere and it activates all the other organic aspects of the same movement, because resting is the most moving of all the movements because it's spiritual and therefore more powerful. Rest tends to move your whole organism to a greater appreciation of all the other levels. You come out of the rest with a new experiential vision of the value of responding and reflecting, and the reflections are nourished from a deeper source, the Holy Spirit, which is the center of this dynamic process. So it goes from reflection to an emphasis on conversation, then goes onto an emphasis on communion with God. So now Lectio, as far as reading goes, might only take just a few sentences. The Sacred Word, even

though we use it differently in centering prayer, is a summary of all scripture. All we know about quantum physics, the most power is the smallest unit. Prayer gets stronger as it gets simpler, and more powerful.

A moment of rest refreshes or enlightens the other levels of our human nature; they now begin to cooperate from higher point of view; they have a certain enlightened understanding of their role in relating to God. Meanwhile the word of God relates to us on every level of our being, whatever level we're on, so if we respond at every level, we have an integrated total response to the total gift of God and some hope as this develops, of being able to give this whole being to God in total self surrender. It's the most we can do in the journey, with grace. It's then that God transforms each level of our being into the divine way of being human. Something Jesus gave us an example of.

By emphasizing the contemplative experience or the resting side as we do in centering prayer, we tilt all the other moments on the circle so that we move the emphasis or energy of our relationship to God to a stage that is more appropriate to God, until we get to resting which is our most important way of relating to God because God is always resting. To find out what that means you have to rest too. He always is acting so as a result of our experience of rest, we find out we have to find a way to bring rest into our daily life, into daily action. Our faculties are now prepared to do this. Our memory helps us remember the presence of God, our images help us by thinking in biblical images, and our relationship to God is conversational throughout the day.

This rest, the level that emphasizes rest, remember one level never denies the other levels, it simply emphasizes a new perfection of the whole process which is the growth into contemplative union, contemplative prayer. These lines represent the movement of rest into the prayer of quiet, prayer of union, prayer of full union, and blessed purification that leads in that direction.

Since this is a dynamic process the experience of closer union with God reflects back on the original diagram and this is when the spirit gives unction to your daily life, to your words, to your preaching, your teaching, to your relationships, and by unction I mean it anoints your conduct, your speech, your imagination so you can express the mystery you've experienced in symbols and terms that are appropriate to peoples' understanding and above all, you, without trying to, become a channel of God's presence in the world. Whatever your role, there's a divine way of being that person, that's what the overflow or the emanation, or result of resting deeply, that anointing of spirit anoints you at every level of your being. Others sense they are in the presence of someone who is with God or in God or in whom God is working. Or a community that is like that, you sense Christ is present in this place although no one is saying a word about it. They just are in the divine presence in the most ordinary way, so the triumph of grace is to lead ordinary life with extraordinary love. This is the thrust of the Lectio movement of moving from knowing Christ casually to learning about him in scripture and interacting in conversation and communion. So that the presence of Christ becomes a resting place both in prayer and action. It makes action more active, sustains the stress of major difficulties, the opposition of persecution without getting upset. More and more energy coming directly from the divine source and the spirit is succeeding in transforming us body, soul and spirit into the image of Christ. That's the project of the gospel.

Lectio is a marvelous invention to do this because it saturates our memory and imagination with the living symbols of the gospel and the conviction that comes through

a developing faith, especially in contemplative prayer, that grace is eternal and always present so that when we take up the Old Testament, as the fathers did, we read Christ back into it. That was their great insight. That's how they baptized the Old Testament because they saw Christ pre-figured or as present there in symbolic form. It is our capacity to perceive symbols like a myth or poetry that enables us to grasp a truth in ways other than the rational, which tends to get bogged down in self reflection.

This movement of opening to Christ takes us into the New Testament where we read back into the scripture our own experience of grace or see it mirrored there, which is the allegorical sense of scripture. When you find your life of grace mirrored in events of Christ's life, wisdom sayings, and parables, then you have entered the contemplative dimension of the gospel and you now read scriptures with a contemplative eye that the Holy Spirit has given you and the whole thing changes. You don't disregard the literal sense but you realize the literal sense is saturated with deeper meaning which you can access gradually as you need it in your daily life and your present state of spiritual development.

Centering Prayer and Lectio Divina (Part 2)

Principles for the Practice of Lectio Divina

So we are going to do Lectio Divina, meaning reading scripture, reading a book of scripture, with great dependence on the Holy Spirit and with an attitude of listening and receptivity and sensitivity to the action of the spirit on our various faculties so that if we feel called to reflect we do it. If we're called to make prayer, do that. If we feel called to do nothing, just to rest in the presence of the one who spoke these words or who was present in the text, fine, we do that. We move freely back and forth depending on the force of the attraction of grace. We make lots of mistakes.

First Principle

Start with a prayer to the Holy Spirit. Remembering that the spirit is within us and is the guide to all the truth as Jesus said in the gospel of John, and we don't have to go any place to find the Holy Spirit, just have to open to that presence within us. However you want to do that. It could be a prayer, could be just sitting for a few moments. There's a great deal of spontaneity and creativity that's useful in the contemplative life. If you want to destroy the contemplative life put it in a straightjacket as certain lifestyles have tried to do in Church history that took an immense amount of reform to fix again.

Second Principle

If you are reading the Old Testament, read Christ into it as the fathers did. That means that every event in the Old Testament that has a symbolic force refers to the coming of Christ as a preview of the grace of Christ, which is the fullness of grace. That means that grace is present in these Old Testament characters and what they have done. Then read the New Testament as if reading your own experience of grace into it, so that you are alert to the fact that this text is talking about you and your experience of life and grace. Thus, in this way the scripture and parables of Jesus and wisdom sayings, the main events of his life, especially his passion, death, and resurrection, become mirrors in which you see your own life experience of grace reflected back to you so that you know what it's like to be like Peter at the betrayal of Jesus. You know what its like to be on Mt. Tabor and have to come down. You know what its like to look at the cross and think that everything is lost. You know what it's like to see Jesus message torn apart and destroyed and his faithful followers running away. In other words the spirit speaks to your experience with the same grace that's present in the Old Testament by anticipation. Its fully present in Christ's historical life, has been preserved in the sacraments, and is present in the Christian community as Jesus promised and is now being offered to you as you deepen your relationship with Christ with Lectio Divina and Centering Prayer. In other words, this grace belongs to you. Scripture is talking about it and it's talking about you.

This makes the scripture come alive and to direct our movement prudently by having the Word of God to encourage or correct our some of our points of view as the case may be. A spiritual director at this point has to keep you on your own path and not interfere with his/her own ideas and books and other nonsense. You have to follow your own inspiration. The spiritual guide or soul mate helps you be faithful to what you feel you should be doing and to point out when you're getting off the path. The inspiration of what you should do comes form your own spirit and not a human director at least most of the time.

Third Principle

The Word of God is addressed to different levels of our being – imagination, memory, our will, our decision-making apparatus, our reflective apparatus and our intuitive faculties. When the spirit begins to move toward addressing our intuitive faculties then the others get dried out and then you have something like the night of sense or a feeling that god has withdrawn from you. Not at all. He just went downstairs to cultivate a faculty that would bring about a closer relationship with him and that means leaving the superficial faculties – memory, imagination, rationalizing – they get left behind. They get bored and look around for something to do and if there's nothing to do they feel sorry for themselves and moan and groan and give you a hard time. You just ignore them all because God can't possibly leave us but it's a great help to realize there is some method to his madness. If you feel abandoned its just your superficial faculties that are feeling this; he hasn't gone anywhere. He's calling us to a deeper union and relationship of communion with him. You just have to sit with it until that becomes apparent and the faculties calm down their noisy complaints and you have some peace enough to hear the Word of God, which always brings peace when you're hearing it fully.

Fourth Principle

Read your experience of grace into the gospels, to see them as parables of grace. That's the way the liturgy treats the gospels. The readings during mass or liturgy are not so much for information but are parables of grace. You see that at the time of Epiphany, which is a magnificent instruction in how to do Lectio Divina as a dynamic process. So Lectio has really used the liturgy as its basic inspiration or just listening to the Word of God produces this kind of inspiration spontaneously.

You will notice in the great feast of the Epiphany you have a complete disregard for the continuity of events in history. The Epiphany is a triptych (work of art divided into three sections) that has as its major title the "Revelation of God" and then you have three separate pictures historically distinct by years that are all put together to communicate to you what the meaning of those events were from the perspective of grace for the church and since you're the church now, how you should look at the mystery of the Epiphany. It's the revelation of God's presence.

First you have the magi – the revelation of God to the gentiles. In the same feast, at least in the hymns, the next big event is the baptism of Jesus 34 years later. This is the revelation of Jesus as God to the Jews. Then you leap ahead a few more years to the marriage feast of Cana, the revelation of Jesus as God to the apostles. Then you go to communion, and by then you are thoroughly prepared and this is a revelation of Christ as God to you in particular and you enter into divine union, which all the other revelations were preparation for. So Epiphany becomes the Feast of the mystical body of Christ, the feast of divine life, in which you are open to the coming of God in ever increasing and deepening levels of your awareness until that awareness moves into pure awareness of union and unity. This is what the Christian religion is all about as far as I can see.

Then let's ask the question, once you have identified grace as working in the Old Testament, fully in the New, and now appropriated and offered to you in the sacraments and in contemplative prayer and in the Christian community, right now, on a day-to-day basis. All of grace is right at our fingertips and the liturgy and Lectio are telling us the symbols that reinforce our experience so that what we know by experience is confirmed

by scripture, and what is taught us by scripture awakens the most important mystery about us, which is the divine indwelling. The external Word awakens the interior Word and you begin to know the different levels in which you're relating to God. This knowing which is not intellectual, but the knowing of the heart and through love keeps on expanding and keeps on embracing all of life, transforming us and our relationships. And each time we move to a new level of faith it takes time to work that enlightenment into that particular level of our faculties. So the spiritual life takes a little bit of time and I recommend that you start soon, or start young. There is an accelerated course for those over 75, if you live to be 75.

Fifth Principle

One of the other principles I'd like to mention is that our interpretation of Scripture or our insight into a particular text that applies to us today is not the last word because others may be getting another interpretation that is suitable to them or you're only interpreting it from the level of whichever one of the "Rs" is predominant in your spiritual life at this time. What you get out of the same story that you had 10 years ago is not the same as you get today. The scriptures are inexhaustible especially certain parts like the parables; no one will ever plumb them to their depths. There's always some new meaning that keeps emerging. Similarly, the wisdom sayings of the Lord.

I'm going to quote one of my favorite sayings, which has to deal with the stages of Lectio beyond those we are looking at this week. The Word of God is the eternal Son of God in the bosom of the Father, the Word has become flesh and that Word is the source of all that exists in the universe and all its content and all its consciousness. So what is the basic thrust of the gospel or Lectio, which is a way of assimilating the gospel and of being assimilated to it.

So the great lights that we might have in Lectio are for today and we may move onto others tomorrow and hopefully we will continue to grow because the spirit in us begins to see our lives and the gospels from an ever clearer perspective as the obstacles like the false self puts up begin to diminish in the light of the spirit and here again the liturgy is a guide to our understanding of how Lectio affects us because we start out with Advent. The theological meaning of Advent is light or enlightenment, especially in the fact that the Word has become incarnate. Epiphany emphasizes this by showing certain other revelations in which the Word has manifested itself not just as in the world but united to the church, which is the meaning of Epiphany and united to everyone who is in the mystical body of the church, which is you and I. So Epiphany is celebration of Christian enlightenment as an expression of the Word of God or continuation of the divine Word in you and my particular humanity in our time and place, inviting us to be the Word of God to the people we know and love in our area, in our profession, in our work. That's why I say there's a divine way of being anything. Even a hobo, there's a divine way of being that. There's even a saint who was one. There's a divine way of being poor, a way of being rich. There's really the movement of the spirit overcoming our false self, purifying it, so that the true self, which is God's manifestation begins to manifest not us, with our illusion of who we are, but manifests us as who we actually are as an expression of the divine goodness, kindness and tenderness and love of God for the world, for humanity, for all creation.

So the **fifth stage** of Lectio is when you no longer have to listen to the Word because you are the Word. Let me explain that a little bit. That I would call unity with the Word, or unity listening or consciousness, so that you no longer listen to the Word, but are the

Word, and are manifesting the Word of God in daily life and transmitting it, insofar as it has taken possession of you in daily life. This is when other people are drawn to you. There's one Centering Prayer lady who teaches biology in some university that has nothing to do with religion. Her office is constantly being assaulted by young people who come to her for counseling. They sense that she is living the answers that they are asking and she may not be able to explain it. Explanation is the least communication of the Word of God. The real communication is to be or become the Word of God in your very being and that is the triumph of grace and we might call that the fifth stage of Lectio when you are or have become God's Word in your particular human situation, with all its circumstances, suffering or joy or whatever, and in all the people you know or love or work for or are professionally attached to, so that when you are walking around the world or going anywhere or doing anything you are constantly pouring into the world the divine energy of who you are and whoever is on that wavelength will begin to receive it or be touched by it. This is the crowning fruit of transformation into the Word of God and the joy of being no self.

Jesus has a wonderful saying that I offer as a final thought and my own Lectio on this phrase might be a help to you or at least be an example of moving through those stages of assimilating the Word. Jesus has this fascinating saying in Matthew 10. He who seeks only himself, (we could include our spiritual aspirations here) will bring himself to ruin, but he who brings himself to nothing will find out who he is. Let's put that in the feminine. She who seeks only herself will bring herself to ruin, but she who brings herself to nothing will find out who she is.

This suggests that we do not know who we are. We have an image of ourselves, a self-image that changes and develops and that we tend to fossilize on some illusory identity such as we over-identify with our feelings. There's nothing wrong with feelings. We need to face them, but to over-identify leads to acting out in a way that's destructive in many circumstances. We also over-identify with the cultural conditioning from which we emerge so we say we are an Irishman or a catholic or a lawyer or a parent or a grandparent. You are not a grandparent. You may have children; you may have begotten them, but you are not identified with this child because the true you has no identity except what God has given you and you don't know what that is. You only find out by not being any thing anymore.

So our over-identification with the emotions is the work to dismantling the false self. Our over-identification with our cultural conditioning, we belong to this family, with this ethnic group, with this religion; that has to be dismembered in order to become nothing. So the last thing that has to be dis-identified with, which is ever more difficult is the de-role-ing process, in which who we think we are begins to vanish or is disintegrated, or is clobbered by circumstances so that you can't be that any more. Life tends to accompany this spiritual movement, so that if you don't get this idea in adolescence, which few of us do or in early adulthood or in midlife crisis which makes us question some of the things we sought with all our energy. It's not that the good things that God created are not good. It's the over-identification with them makes them into gods or substitutes for the true happiness which emerges when we accept ourselves or bring ourselves to no thing, when we are no longer anything. To become a true monk you have to be willing not to be a monk. When you no longer care about being a parent for selfish reasons you are the perfect parent. It's in letting go of the exaggeration that we've over-identified with that enables us to fulfill our role. I am not a priest though I have that role. I am nothing who is exercising the role of priest temporarily.

So the Word of God challenges who we think we are. So it's not just a movement of grace into us, but a relinquishing and self-surrender of our false selves with our false identities, which prevents grace from enabling us completely to be transformed into Christ, to be who we really are, and that turns out to be unconditional love because that's who God is and whoever is no thing or nothing is prepared to manifest God in the fullest possible way. Be a little cautious of our aspiration in the spiritual world, to be a great contemplative, to be a great spiritual director, a great abbot, a great bishop, a great anything you want to be. Maybe you want to be canonized. All I know is it costs a lot of money.

Let it all go. That's what I'm saying. That's what the Word of God is saying. Let me be God in you. As St. Catherine of Sienna said, "There is no me but God." This is the final seems to me, this is supposed to be the crown, the completion of the Lectio Divina process as we move beyond the levels of rest, to beyond experience of anything because God is not in anything, in any concept or feeling or experience but God is totally present to us and this is when he addresses us at the fullest level of our being, not just at the lower levels. He addresses us as he addressed Moses, face to face, being to being, with nothing in between in the way of false self, illusion.

I suggest that this is a considerable project that only God could have thought it up, but that seems to be what God is inviting us to in the gospel and is providing us with all the means that you need to get there. It's the wise balancing of means that enables this extraordinary project of becoming divine. Not just becoming a better human being, but becoming God-like or God, not in the ontological sense, which would be contrary to theology but in the practical, experiential existential sense of forgetting oneself, and oneself as a fixed point of reference ceases, because that reference point is constantly changing and being transformed. As Paul says from glory to glory as you penetrate and are penetrated by the divine life. So it's the inner life of the Trinity, of unconditional love, that is communicated to us by the Word of God in the degree that we are prepared to hear it, and beyond that in the degree that we are prepared to become it.

I recommend picking up the scriptures occasionally and doing a little Lectio and our Centering prayer is what moves Lectio if you're stuck on your faculties, using your mind to go to God or overactive as if you have to do something to pray. Centering Prayer focuses us on overcoming obstacles, which are significant in our time, in order to become completely open. Consent is not an effort. Surrender is not an effort. And transformation is only something God can do so from that perspective it should be easy. My heartfelt prayer for each of you is keep going, and have invincible confidence that this is God's work in you and not to be afraid to ask that what has been begun in you might be completed.