

The Classical Monastic Practice of Lectio Divina

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The classical practice of Lectio Divina--the prayerful reading of the Bible, the book Christians believe to be divinely inspired--is being rediscovered and renewed in our time. At the same time a number of ways of practicing it have sprung up leading to a certain confusion regarding its relationship to the distinct practice of Centering Prayer. A few distinctions may be helpful.

First of all, we need to distinguish Lectio Divina from Bible study, which is very useful at another time and provides a solid conceptual background for the practice of Lectio Divina.

Secondly, Lectio Divina is not the same as reading the scriptures for the purpose of private edification, encouragement, or getting acquainted with the many-sided aspects of revelation, and especially with Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God. Lectio Divina is rather a way or formula for furthering these objectives.

Thirdly, Lectio Divina is not the same as spiritual reading, which moves beyond the exclusive reading of sacred scripture to include other spiritual books such as the lives and writings of the saints.

Finally, Lectio Divina is not the same as praying the scriptures in common, a contemporary development that is sometimes identified with Lectio Divina. The classical practice of Lectio Divina was done in private and consisted in following the movement of the Holy Spirit in regard to the time one might devote to each step of the process, as well as passing from one step to another during the same period of prayer. Following a particular structure, such as is required in all forms of common prayer, tends to limit spontaneity to the movement of the Holy Spirit, which is the heart of the practice.

Praying the scriptures in common might well be regarded as a kind of "Liturgy of Lectio Divina" or even better, as a kind of shared "Liturgy of the Word." With some variations, it usually goes like this: A passage is read out loud three or four times followed by two or three minutes of silence. After each reading the participants apply themselves inwardly to the text in specified ways. After the first reading, they become aware of a word or phrase. After the second they reflect about the meaning or significance of the text. After the third reading, they respond in spontaneous prayer. After the fourth reading, they simply rest in God's presence and after a period of silence, those who wish are invited to do a brief faith sharing on the text. In some cases there is a brief sharing after the third or fourth reading and period of silence. Praying the scriptures in common during weekly Centering Prayer meetings or at a separate time has proved to be a valuable experience and an occasion of bonding the members together in faith and love.

The classical practice of Lectio Divina can be divided into two forms: the monastic and the scholastic. The scholastic form divides the process into stages or steps in a hierarchical pattern. Following the reading of a passage of scripture, the first step was to allow a phrase or word to arise out of the text and to focus on it. This was called Lectio. The second was the reflective part, pondering upon the words of the sacred text, and was called meditatio "meditation." The spontaneous movement of the will in response to these reflections was called oratio, "affective prayer." And as these reflections and acts of will simplified, one moved from time to time to a state of resting in the presence of God, and that was called contemplatio "contemplation." This way of doing Lectio Divina developed in the Middle Ages at the beginning of the scholastic period with its tendency to compartmentalize the spiritual life and to rely on rational analysis in theology to the virtual exclusion of personal experience.

The monastic form of Lectio Divina is a more ancient method and was practiced by the Mothers and Fathers of the Desert and later in monasteries both East and West. It is oriented more toward contemplative prayer than the scholastic form, especially when the latter developed into what we call today discursive meditation, conceived as moving from one thought to another or as one stage in a series of steps. That method is a good way of praying provided you don't get stuck there and fail to move on to contemplative prayer. One of the purposes of the method of Centering Prayer is to help people to detach themselves from the exclusive use of discursive meditation, which became the predominant method of prayer in recent centuries, even in cloisters. Most Christians are trained to reflect and to multiply particular acts of the will in order to go to God and find it hard to imagine praying without following this procedure. Since praying the scriptures in common involves discursive meditation, it is normally more appropriate to have such a "Liturgy of the Word" after a Centering Prayer period rather than before. Above all, the two practices should not be combined because each has its own integrity and uniqueness.

In the monastic way of doing Lectio Divina we listen to how God is addressing us in a particular text of scripture. From this perspective there are no stages, ladders or steps in Lectio Divina, but rather there are four moments along the circumference of a circle. All the moments of the circle are joined to each other in a horizontal and interrelated pattern as well as to the center, which is the Spirit of God speaking to us through the text and in our hearts. To pay attention to any one of the four "moments" is to be in direct relationship to all the others. In this perspective, one may begin one's prayer at any "moment" along the circle, as well as moving easily from one "moment" to another, according to the inspiration of the Spirit.

Paul writes, "Know you not that your bodies are the temples of God and that the Spirit of God dwells within you?" (1 Cor.3:16). Suppose you were struck by that question as you are reading a section of your scripture reading for the day, say a dozen or so verses, and you felt nudged to let your attention linger over those words to savour them. The early monks read scripture aloud so they were actually listening to it. They would then choose a phrase, or a sentence at the most, that impressed them. They would sit with that sentence or phrase without thinking of stages or following some predetermined schema, but just listening, repeating slowly the same short text over and over again. This receptive disposition enabled the Holy Spirit to expand their capacity to listen. As they listened, they might perceive a new depth to the text or an expanding meaning. A particular insight might also be singularly appropriate for them in their particular life situation or for the events of the coming day. According to scripture, the Spirit speaks to us every day. "If today you hear his voice, harden not your heart" (Psalm 95). The monks listened not so much to understand the text, not to conceptualize or analyze it, but just to hear it. And to hear it without any preconceived purpose of what they were going to do with it.

This is already a deep form of receptivity. Those who practice Lectio Divina in this way are already moving toward the fourth "moment" of this dynamic process leading to resting in God. In response to a new insight, they might be inclined to respond in thanksgiving or with interior movements of love, praise or gratitude. As this listening attitude stabilizes, they might experience moments of contemplative prayer in the strict sense, in which they are just present to God, or quietly engulfed in the divine presence. In this situation, one's attentiveness to God expands into the sheer awareness of the divine presence. For the moment, we break through the veil of our own ways of thinking. The external word of God in scripture awakens us to the interior Word of God in our inmost being. When that awareness dissipates, we may go back and read more of the text, provided of course, if we have the time.

This monastic way of doing Lectio Divina always begins with prayer to the Holy Spirit. The four moments along the circumference of the circle are reading in the presence of God, reflecting in the sense of ruminating (not in the sense of discursive meditation), responding with spontaneous prayer, and resting in God beyond thoughts and particular acts of the will.

By "ruminating" I mean sitting with a sentence, phrase or even one word that emerges from the text, allowing the Spirit to expand our listening capacity and to open us to its deeper meaning; in other words, to penetrate the spiritual sense of a scripture passage. This leads to the faith experience of the living Christ and increases the practical love for others that flows from that relationship.

As we repeat the phrase or sentence slowly, over and over, a deeper insight may arise. For example, take the words of Jesus, "I will not call you servants but friends." All of a sudden, it might dawn on us what it means to be a friend of Christ. Our awareness expands without our having done anything but allow the Spirit to act. It is a heart-to-heart exchange with Christ. We think the text but we do not think about the text. If we are thinking in the sense of reflecting, we are dominating the conversation. That can be done fruitfully some other time. Here it is a question of receiving and resting in Christ's presence as the source of the word or phrase.

Lectio Divina is a special kind of process, and to benefit fully from its fruits, its integrity has to be respected. The ripe fruit of the regular practice of Lectio Divina is assimilating the word of God and being assimilated by it. It is a movement from conversation to communion. It also enables us to express our deep spiritual experience of union with God in words or symbols that are appropriate. There is thus a movement not only into silence, but from silence to expression.

In the Trinity, the Eternal Word is always emerging from the infinite silence of the Father and always returning. The persons in the Trinity live in each other rather than in themselves. The Father knows himself only in the Son, the Son only in the Father and the Spirit expresses their unity, bringing together into One relationships that are infinitely distinct. The Trinity is the basis for the oneness and diversity that we see expressed throughout creation. In this way of doing Lectio, one is recognizing the presence of the Word of God in all creation and in every occurrence, experiencing what the author of John's gospel wrote in the prologue, "Without Him was made nothing that has been made." In contemplative prayer, we are in touch with the source of all creation; hence, we transcend ourselves and our limited worldviews. As a result, we feel at one with other people and enjoy a sense of belonging to the universe. The fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily in Jesus, according to Paul. The Divinity begins to dwell in us bodily in proportion to our capacity to receive it as we grow in union with the Eternal Word. This process needs to be nourished both by the interior silence of contemplative prayer and cultivated by Lectio Divina (in the sense of listening). The awareness of the divine presence will also begin to overflow into ordinary activity.

The scholastic method is a good way to learn Lectio Divina whether privately or in a group, but at a certain point when people have gotten the idea, we should carefully explain the monastic method which is oriented from the start toward resting in God by establishing us in a listening attitude. The dynamic interaction between those four "moments" of Lectio-reading, reflecting in the sense of ruminating on a particular word or phrase, responding in prayer, and resting in God puts us more and more at the disposal of the Holy Spirit.