

# The Practice of *Lectio Divina*

by Bill O'Byrne

*Lectio Divina* was designed to help us pray, grounding our thoughts in Scripture, and at the same time opening hearts to listen to the Spirit through the Scriptures. So often we get caught up in our own thoughts in prayer and end up simply carrying on a mental monologue with myself before God. Many of us were taught to read and study the Bible through observation, implication and application. Once we have gained a familiarity with the Scriptures and with this basic method, our hearts often begin to long for a more direct encounter with the God of the Scriptures. When we read not only in order to find a behavior to change, but to be changed, then we find Christ is formed in us. When we read not only with a mind eager to collect facts and insights, but with a heart eager its Truth, then we are more receptive to the Spirit's attempts to give us the mind of Christ. When we read with a heart desiring to not only know God, but to love Him, then the Scriptures become the context for a more intimate communion with our God. The Lectio format can be used on its own, but it is also the basic format for *Imago Christi's* resource: "Prayer Exercises by Temperament."

The basis for these Prayer Exercises is an ancient form of prayer, which in Latin means "divine" or "spiritual reading."<sup>1</sup> While all of the components of Lectio are mentioned in Scripture, and in various formats throughout Church History, the term "*Lectio Divina*" was first used in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. But its roots as a unified practice can be traced back further to the early monastic tradition in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (Benedict's Rule para. 48). Allowing the Bible to form our mind, our hearts and our prayers is something that a number of biblical authors exemplify and exhort us to do, as the Scripture references after the description of each step of Lectio below illustrate.

*Lectio Divina* is comprised of four traditional steps: Reading, Meditation, Response, and Contemplation, to which we'll follow M. Robert Mulholland's example and add two more: Silence to get us started, and Incarnation to finish out our prayer with the resolve to follow the promptings we experienced during prayer.<sup>2</sup>

- Silence: start with a whole minute of silence to calm your heart and prepare yourself for this spiritual meal. This is easy to skip, and just dive in. Try to set aside any preoccupations that will detract your focus from the Word of God. Open your heart to meet Jesus in the reading. (Silence: cf. Ps 4:4b; 46:10; Hab 2:20; Jn 15:4a, 9.)

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<sup>1</sup> A recent book outlining the history and revival of this practice that can be viewed on Google Books is by Raymond Studzinski, *Reading to Live: the Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

<sup>2</sup> M. Robert Mulholland Jr., *Invitation to a Journey* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), pp. 112 ff.

- Reading: one of the most unique aspects of *Lectio Divina* is this manner in which you read – slowly and repetitively. Take one passage, one scene, or even one verse or saying. A short Gospel passage is often a good place to start. Rather than breezing over the passage and reaching for your journal, or rushing to your applications and requests, take time to “eat a relaxed meal” with the Lord. Chew on each word, start imagining what it would be like to be there, and experience what Jesus and the disciples were going through in this scene. (cf. Deut 8:3; Ps 119:103, 131.)
- Meditation: this is simply another biblical word for ruminating or thinking over, but in a way that the Spirit can guide our thoughts. Here is where you can use various approaches and questions to guide your thoughts under the direction of the Spirit (cf. “Prayer Exercises by Temperament”). It is so easy for our scripture meditation to begin and end in our minds, and not break through to our heart and will. Let your Spirit-led imagination run way with you to fill-in the details of the setting of the passage, the facial expressions, the tone of voice. Beyond agreeing with the concepts in the passage, try to consider what it would be like to sympathize and empathize with what, for example, Jesus and the disciples are experiencing, so that you will be motivated to accept His decisions and act accordingly. (cf. Josh 1:8; Ps 1:2; 119:97, 99; Heb 12:3.)
- Response: This is where we get the well-known ACTS acronym for: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving and Supplication. Once you have seen how God revealed Himself in His Word, now worship God according to the pattern, or characteristics, by which He revealed Himself in the reading (Adoration). Then acknowledge and repent of the many ways you have not followed in His steps (Confession). Next thank Him for His forgiveness and the way His Spirit lead you to see what you might not have acknowledged on your own; thank him for what He has done and given you in regard to the theme of the passage (Thanksgiving). Now you are in a place where your requests can be made in a more pure way in concert with God’s will (Supplication). This may be an active, thinking and processing type of prayer that can be done in concert with the leading and prompting of the Holy Spirit. This responsive prayer can also be a pouring out of your whole heart and soul out to God (cf. 2Sam 7:18-26; Rom 11:33-36; Col 3:16, etc.)
- Contemplation: Next we move to a more passive listening posture in prayer. Have you ever been truly awestruck or dumbstruck? A sunset, or painting, or profound truth just left you speechless; words don’t suffice; your heart is full of joy and wonder. Have you ever shared an experience so intimate that words would only spoil it and you just savor the moment together? Contemplation is merely focusing on God as revealed in His Word in a way that opens up this “holy hush” in your soul, and then

staying there for a while. This may be an unfamiliar step for many of us, where our monologue, or even Spirit-inspired dialogue stops, and we “wait on the Lord” in expectancy. In Contemplation are moved primarily by the desire to listen to the divine monologue, or simply to enter the communion of hearts with Him. Put down your pen and just enjoy God. You can write about it later. After we have had our say and have been inspired in our thoughts and responses, we now give the control of the conversation completely over to God, and simply listen while focusing on Him. This is the place where our heart is most open to what the Holy Spirit wants to tell us, where we are most open to the transformation He longs to work in us. (cf. Ps 27:4; 131:2; 139:23-24; 2Cor 3:18; Eph 1:19-20; Col 3:1-3.)

- Incarnation: Now is the appropriate time to ask the Lord what He is calling you to “do” about the truth that He has implanted in your heart. Perhaps your application is patently clear and you simply need to commit yourself to carry it out. What sort of response is required of you now, in light of your experience of Jesus in the Word? What concrete steps can you offer Him in obedience to His call? (cf. Matt 7:24; 12:50; 28:20; Jn 13:17; Jas 1:22.)

It is a good discipline to keep a journal of your practice of *Lectio Divina* that you can refer back to. As part of your weekly rhythm, you may want to set aside a day to review your experience of that week’s exercises, and follow the thread of the Holy Spirit’s promptings in your heart. People relate to journaling differently, depending on their temperament and experience with it. If you have never journaled your prayers, you may indeed benefit greatly from putting pen to paper, and slowing down your thoughts as you write them. Early in the process of using *Lectio Divina*, journaling helps to keep you “in the groove” of the prayer outline. If on the other hand you have been journaling for many years, you may need a break from the “need to record everything,” so that you can experience it more fully. You can journal briefly at the end of your prayer, or weekly as a review, but of course you don’t have to journal at all!

There are also different ways to share your experience of this practice of prayer, try sharing with a close spiritual friend, with the members of your small group, or even form a group to practice *Lectio Divina* together weekly as part of your corporate dedication to Christ and each other.

The more you utilize this pattern of scriptural prayer, the more naturally disposed you will be to follow the Spirit into the depths of Scripture’s truth. Your prayer will become more balanced and focused, as you will become more open to the Word of God, to the Spirit, and to God Himself.