

Introduction

This book contains biblically based meditations on community life and interpersonal relations. Integrating both historical and contemporary meanings, we will read the texts as letters to us as individuals and a community, and derive personal and pastoral applications.

In contrast to the individualism of modern western societies, the ancient Hebrews and Christians were community oriented. It helped them survive the harsh natural, social, and political environment. Accordingly, the Bible has a rich variety of teachings on community. Ten books this size could not exhaust it.

Why This Book is Necessary

These individualistic and divisive times demand community-building efforts. The attention paid to individual rights, potential, and autonomy has made community considerations secondary. To the detriment of both the individual and the community, consciousness of the common good has receded significantly.

Put to its proper use, the Bible, a community book in every way, is a good foundation for addressing the decline in community consciousness. The recommended developmental process of this book, *lectio divina*, an ancient way of prayerfully reading the Bible both as an individual and a community, is similarly appropriate.

The modest length and compartmented structure of this book suits its subject and audience. Its division into manageable meditations and sub-topics accommodates the schedules of busy people who often have only short pockets of time for reading.

This book's dialogical tone offers an alternative to the authoritarianism and ideological extremism that impedes community-building.

Why I Wrote This Book

This book flows from my values, spirituality, experience, and expertise. Empowered by the Spirit and so many people who have assisted me in my journey (see my Acknowledgments), I felt particularly capable of shedding light on this important and inexhaustible subject.

I believe the Bible has much to say about today's problems, including one of the most pressing, our difficulties in getting along together, whether as a church or a society. The reflective approach fostered by *lectio divina* operates by changing hearts rather than by imposing commands. Faith rather than force can transform both individuals and groups.

I wrote this book to share my reflections as an impetus for you to share yours. I will say my piece, then get out of the way. I welcome feedback that will further my understanding. Sharing our lives and stories is at the heart of Christian community.

Who This Book is For

Community in the Bible is for anyone interested in biblical perspectives on community and their personal and collective relevance. It is also for those who wish to deepen their relationship with the Bible through the practice of *lectio divina* (prayerful and holistic reading), which is experiencing a rebirth among lay Catholics after lying dormant for nearly a millennia and a half.

The book is for persons at all levels of familiarity with the Bible and theology. While written from a Roman Catholic perspective, it is also appropriate for Christians from other traditions who are intrigued by this model and interested in exploring this important topic.

This book will also be helpful for Bible or faith sharing groups that use the *lectio divina* model as a framework for reflection and sharing. A description of this model can be

found in chapters seven and eight of my book, *The How-To Book of the Bible* (Our Sunday Visitor) and in the Appendix to this book.

Bringing Back the Bible

Without most of its faithful realizing it, the Bible has slipped to the backburners of Roman Catholic consciousness and spirituality. The progress in biblical awareness that occurred after Vatican II seems to have been put on hold. Other pressing issues have taken center stage (e.g., issues concerning reproductive rights, the breakdown of the family, orthodoxy, sexual abuse, gender relations, the priest shortage in developed countries).

Those issues, however, will never be addressed effectively without recourse to the Bible. Any dichotomy between the Bible and daily morality and spirituality impoverishes both; the Bible needs to be interpreted and implemented in real world contexts, and morality and spirituality must take their direction from the Bible. Consistent with the spirituality of lay ecclesial movements and new communities, this book's approach to the Bible is contemplative and apostolic rather than dogmatic or academic.

This book is one of many efforts to restore the Bible to its proper place in Roman Catholic spirituality and family and pastoral life. What better topic for reversing recent trends than community, the source and primary audience of the Bible, and what better catalyst than *lectio divina*?

To mine the Bible for its insights into community structures and relations, a community-based tool such as *lectio divina* is fitting. *Lectio* (a widely used abbreviation) is the Church's oldest and standard model for interacting with God through his word. It constitutes the natural way human beings process both inspired and human communications, and has its origins in the Jewish community's listening to the word of God during Old Testament times.

The process of compiling and receiving the Bible involved listening, repeating, reflecting, relating, cross-referencing stories and teachings, remembering, applying, praying, contemplating, and actualizing -- activities that constitute *lectio* and are suited to the reading of this book. These were handed down within the Jewish community and eventually adopted by Christians, whose initial Bible was the Old Testament.

It was natural for the early Christians to process revelation according to familiar principles and practices. Since then these have been handed down largely through the monastic communities, beginning with the desert fathers and mothers. The Benedictines and Trappists have been the primary guardians and transmitters of *lectio divina*.

Since Vatican II, *lectio* has been restored to its rightful place in lay spirituality, where it began. It is particularly suited to a group setting, where the Lord is especially present (see Mt 18:19-20).

Practicing Lectio Divina on the Meditations

The meditations' integration of reflection, prayer, experience, and application is born of my retreats and books on *lectio*. *Lectio* is comprised of five simple but challenging steps:

- reading / listening,
- meditation (i.e., repetitive recitation, reflection, and application),
- prayer (sharing of emotions and response to God's word and our life, candid dialogue),
- contemplation (a listening disposition, silent and receptive basking in God's presence),
- implementation / action.

Through this natural process we engage biblical texts and life experiences in an integrated and holistic manner. Each encounter can be a new beginning, a fresh start.

I have published eight books on applications of *lectio divina* and discussed its multiple nuances, dimensions, and applications in many contexts, yet I never forget that in its fundamental form, sufficient for the deepest reflection on scripture and intimacy with God, it can be taught and described simply and succinctly:

We identify a portion of scripture to read. Most people prefer the Lectionary readings, which are organized in a cohesive and progressive way. We read slowly and if possible, aloud, perhaps whispering or murmuring in order to engage more of our senses. We continue until we reach a word, phrase, verse, image, or concept that strikes us and generates thoughts, feelings, and perhaps recollections or insights. This is the reading stage.

We repeat this “word” in order to internalize it and let it penetrate us consciously and subconsciously. (Fr. Thomas Keating’s books, particularly *Invitation to Love*, discuss the latter lucidly.) We then relate this word to our life, our present and perhaps past (the monks used the term *reminiscence* to describe recollection of related biblical texts that come to mind, but it can also include related “life texts,” i.e., experiences). We then consider practical applications to our life. This is the meditation stage.

It is difficult to distinguish the reading and meditation stages sharply, and thus in the early church they were lumped together under the term “reading.”

We then respond to the word, lest it burst within us. This is an emotional as well as spiritual reaction that generally leads to a quiet receptivity whereby we listen and let God speak. This contemplative disposition has been referred to as “simple presence.” Brother Lawrence’s classic on the subject is entitled *The Practice of the Presence of God*.

Reflecting its conversational nature, we oscillate between prayer, the active component of this spiritual dialogue, and contemplation, the receptive mode. Good

communication is not mechanical or prescriptive. It is spirit (our hearts) and Spirit driven, a collaborative engagement between God and humans.

Like the preceding activities, prayer and contemplation are two sides of the same coin, and in the early church were referred to simply as “prayer.”

The fluidity and oscillation characteristic of both pairs of activities is representative of the process as a whole. It is not linear --another reason why, as discussed below, I don't feel constrained to treat the subject in a linear way, a design to which the Bible is not conducive anyway.

While I have described the process in an orderly, continuous fashion, in practice it is not always so. There is no mandate that we have to start at the beginning and continue non-stop until the end. The process is communication -- dialogue -- and therefore is subject to human subjectivity and divine providence and inspiration. The Spirit blows where it wills (see Jn 3:8), and human nature and circumstances are hardly uniform and predictable.

We are just as apt to begin in silent receptivity (contemplation), be moved to prayer, and then take up the scripture passage. Or we can follow the process as if it were a blueprint.

Like interpersonal interactions, each experience of dialogue and encounter with God and his word is unique. However, recognizing the typical activities and process humans engage in during interaction with God's word gives us a beginning and reference point. Some order is natural and necessary, but it should not constrain the Spirit or us. We need this freedom and flexibility lest our practice become stale and monotonous. Spontaneity and creative responsiveness keeps the practice fresh; structure keeps it stable, centered, and substantive.

After we go through these three activities the real test begins: how we apply and live it. This final stage, action, is implied throughout Christian history but was articulated specifically on a wide scale first in the Middle Ages, largely through the efforts of Richard of St. Victor.

In summary, we read slowly, repetitively, and with recollection, relate the word we receive to our lives, share our thoughts and feelings with God, and sit quietly and patiently while awaiting His response in the depth of our hearts.

Nourished and guided by the experience and message, we bring it to life, which further engages the process and the Lord as he draws us into deeper intimacy and self-understanding through the cauldron of experience and human weakness and limitations.

The Ongoing Cycle of Lectio Divina

Lectio is an ongoing, dynamic process. The action stage encompasses not only the implementation of the message received, but the divine initiatives and providence manifested in human events and interactions. These in turn become material for further *lectio*, leading into an ongoing dialogue. The Bible is essentially the story of God's dialogue with humanity and the providential initiatives that accompany it. The story continues to unfold in each of our lives. *Lectio* is not a static process confined to quiet times; it is a way of participating actively in this story, and writing new chapters with God and neighbor (the Christian community).

To use the language of Vatican II, *lectio's* versatility and practicality enable it to help us read the signs of the times (see Mt 16:3) and of our lives, as well as the divine signs characteristic of providence. In a modern world where secular influences beleaguer community life and interpersonal relationships, *lectio* offers an inspired alternative.

Much more could be said about the structure and flow of *lectio*, but this explanation should allow you to get started.

The Unconscious Dimension of *Lectio Divina*

Many people practice *lectio* unknowingly, sometimes more fluidly than those experienced in the process. The process I have described above is the natural human response to a significant stimulus, particularly one with spiritual connotations; believers experience it in whole or in part in the course of their interactions with God and neighbor. Chapter eight of *The How-To Book of the Bible* discusses how the dialogic process of *lectio* mirrors the flow and substance of human interactions, particularly romantic or intimate ones. The lives of biblical characters such as Moses, Job, Mary, and Paul exemplify the process, so encountering them in the scriptures can also be an experience of the practice.

Writings Conducive to *Lectio Divina*

My writing is intended to be conducive to *lectio divina* in the sense that it is reflective and holistic rather than analytical and one-dimensional. Since this is a community book I ought to give credit and recommendations where such is due. Community values and spirit are contagious. I would be remiss if I did not disclose where I learned much of my community spirituality.

In my judgment, Cardinal Carlo Martini, S.J.'s various books provide the finest contemporary example of meditations on community-related subjects in the *lectio divina* style. He incorporates Jesuit spirituality into a process molded by the contemplative Benedictine and Trappist orders, reminding us that *lectio divina* is a universal model compatible with the various spiritualities within the church. The fact that most of his books originate in talks he gave or dialogues he participated in reflects the dialogic essence of *lectio divina*.

Lectio divina, a way of communicating with God, self, and neighbor, ultimately advances community spirituality. When I speak of writing in *lectio divina* style, I mean by integrating reflection, referencing of biblical texts and other relevant sources, remembering (recollection of related life experiences and memories), relating or identifying with (personalization of the passage as if it was written to me or to us), application (making such relating concrete by articulating appropriate responses), prayerfulness, and recognition of the need for action and implementation of the message received.

Reflection questions are suited to interaction with the Bible because the Bible evokes and poses questions more than it provides answers. It invites us into an ongoing love affair and the periodic wrestling that such an affair entails. It does not imply a once and for all experience. Acceptance of and obedience to Christ, as in a spousal relationship, is not a once and done phenomena. It is a journey of a lifetime.

Distinctive Dimensions of Lectio Divina

Lectio divina differs from study in that it is not primarily analysis and mental activity. It differs from spiritual reading in that it is not primarily designed to inform and motivate, but to transform at the deepest level. Such transformation requires that the whole person be involved, which occurs naturally when the various activities are practiced.

At the risk of oversimplification and compartmentalizing the process, let me explain how specific human faculties come to the fore during the various activities. When we read and listen to the text, particularly aloud, our senses are engaged. When we meditate (i.e., repeat the message, relate it to relevant biblical or other spiritual texts and life experiences, and apply it to our life), our mind, conscious and subconscious, takes center stage. When we pray, our emotions are released, and when we sit quietly in contemplation, we hope to be present and receptive to the Holy Spirit's stirring in our heart. When we act on the word, all

the human faculties are engaged, making our living of the Bible a consummation and perpetuation of the process.

This process is communal not only when we share it in a group, but also because we need each other's support and feedback. We can't do it ourselves. We depend not only on God, but on each other.

Expectations

Realistically we can't expect to experience deep insights, intuitions, and sensations of divine presence every time we engage God's word. The standard biblical analogy of marriage aptly describes the relationship between God and us as individuals and as a community. Some days we correspond to one another perfectly, and other days we wonder if we really know our partner or ourselves. Frequent distractions get in the way. Some come unavoidably from the flow of life; others arise from our laxness or lust for the world's goods and pleasures.

Receiving God's word fruitfully and remaining faithful in marriage both demand obedience and perseverance. These themes are prominent in the gospels, each in its own way. Mark shows the price partners pay in terms of suffering, Matthew emphasizes morality, Luke presents life through anecdotes (e.g., the various women who support and engage Jesus, beginning with his mother) and parables (e.g., the Good Samaritan), and John illustrates the spirituality and theology that support relationship.

Reflecting upon these meditations, we believe that God desires to speak to us, and in his own time and way will do so. We can't force things, just as we can't treat our spouse (or other loved ones) as a puppet and expect fulfillment.

Because *lectio divina* focuses on efforts but leaves the results in God's hands, we can relax, secure in the knowledge that he will make all things work to our good (see Rom 8:28) even amid discouraging appearances and feelings of doubt.

In approaching the texts in this way we respond to Benedict XVI's enthusiastic exhortation:

“I would like in particular to recall and recommend the ancient tradition of *Lectio divina*....If it is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the church -- I am convinced of it -- a new spiritual springtime. As a strong point of biblical ministry, *Lectio divina* should therefore be increasingly encouraged, also through the use of new methods, carefully thought through and in step with the times” (Address to the Catholic Bible Federation International *Dei Verbum* Congress at the Vatican, 16 September 2005).

Entering Into the Texts

These dialogical, open-ended meditations provide a starting point and stimulus for your own observations and applications. Personalize them by injecting your thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Each meditation ends with reflection questions designed to help you identify with the biblical passages and discover their personal relevance. They are intended to stimulate and supplement your reflections rather than constrain or confine them. As you read, you may wish to write or journal your feelings, insights, experiences, prayers, and applications.

We can best assimilate and communicate the Bible through our lives, the way we translate it into attitudes and actions. This will be a frequent theme in the meditations. How easy it is to believe and preach one thing and practice another.

The Order and Structure of the Meditations

The concept of community in the Bible, more cohesive than consistent, is expressed in a variety of ways and contexts. Community values develop and deepen providentially and dynamically rather than predictably and mechanically. Community and interpersonal relations, particularly when infused with the Holy Spirit, ultimately are a mystery.

Accordingly, the meditations are ordered in a literarily fluid and spiritually cohesive and developmental way that facilitates both random and sequential access as well as the use of *lectio divina*. Because it belongs to the realm of spirituality rather than study (though it includes and depends upon the latter for competent interpretation), *lectio divina* is suited to random, programmed (e.g., the Lectionary or liturgy of the hours), or sequential reflection on the Bible.

I describe the meditations as cohesive rather than progressive because community values do not develop linearly in the Bible and thereby resist precise ordering and categorization. Developmentally and conceptually the meditations build upon each other (the beginning of each meditation identifies the connection with the previous one[s]), but they are not arranged according to a strict canonical, chronological, or theological pattern. The primary focus is spiritual and moral: arranging diverse and multi-dimensional passages in a way that communicates the Bible's cohesive message and subsequently enlightens, guides, and challenges us.

For this reason I begin and conclude with meditations that focus on practical aspects of reconciliation and compassion. This is where Christianity begins and ends—God forgives first, and human beings forgive in response to the divine initiative. St. Paul points out that we are in the ministry of reconciliation (see 2 Cor 5:18-21). The meditations with which this book begins and ends provide the foundation for praxis (faith in action) of community values according to the Bible.

The theme of forgiveness, the fundamental message of Jesus, runs throughout the meditations. He, the ultimate manifestation of God's forgiveness, demands that we forgive

others and ourselves in response. To reject this invitation is to follow Satan along the path of pride and despair.

From these foundational values we then move to specific community dynamics such as solidarity and unity, teamwork, charisms, conflict resolution, diversity, flexibility, spontaneity, social and economic justice, hospitality, and impartiality. We conclude with core community values such as redemptive suffering, conversion, evangelization, pastoral care, and charity.

I weave the Old and New Testament together because many passages in the latter are rooted in the former, and we will enrich our notion of Christian community if we integrate Old Testament with New Testament spirituality. I conclude with a prominent passage that captures the richness of Old Testament community spirit and foreshadows key New Testament concepts and passages.

The meditations include many passages from Matthew, John, and Paul. Matthew, the Gospel of the Church, devotes an entire chapter (18) to community relations. At the heart of a spirituality of communion lies John's central moral teaching, love of fellow Christians in emulation of Christ, and the bond between love of neighbor and love of God and salvation. "We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. . . . How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister^p in need and yet refuses help?" (1 Jn 3:14, 17). Paul's letters reveal diverse community environments and pastoral challenges, and as befitting the pastoral letter format he addresses such issues more explicitly than do the gospels.

^p Gk *brother*