

# **Chapter One**

## **Reading the Bible Prayerfully and Holistically**

### **The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina**

“In the history of Moses, as in the other events recorded in the Bible, we find realities that are repeated in the life of every individual. Anyone who is inwardly open and acquainted with prayer can find in the words of scripture what is needed for his or her life.

It seems to me that the decisive questions to be asked by each person are:

What does this scripture passage mean to me? What is it saying to me? How is it related to my life?

We might at first say, "It doesn't have anything to do with my life." But rather than remain with such a first impression, we should look for the cause and ask, "Why is there no connection between this Bible passage and my life? What would I want the connection to be?" In this way, even a negative first impression can be a means of contact between what the Bible says and what we experience.

Often this contact does not take place immediately, but only after we have entered into a dialogue, a wrestling with the words of scripture. Only then does it begin to shed light. Such a dialogue is a decisive help toward prayer, which springs from our center and expresses our deepest yearnings. This is the aim of spiritual guidance: To help us express ourselves in prayer as we are, in keeping with our situation and nature. Real prayer is not child's play. Scripture teaches us that prayer is a struggle, a battle. It places us face to face with our greatest difficulties. In prayer we are trained to look at the problems of our life with an open eye and to accept them, for human beings are often afraid to confront themselves.”

(An excerpt from the foreword to the German edition of Cardinal Carlo M. Martini, S.J.'s classic "*From Moses to Jesus: The Way of the Paschal Mystery.*")

The Catholic tradition is home to western civilization's oldest and most natural, universal, and holistic model of potential fulfillment, spiritual communications, and biblical spirituality. You've experienced it in some form and degree, even if you are unaware of the vocabulary or process. It is a seminal, integrated process that persons of all cultures and creeds engage in reflexively as part of the dialogical reading and communication process.

*Lectio* (leks-ee-oh) *divina* (di-veen-a) is the Latin term for divine or sacred reading or listening. Initially it applied primarily to reading or listening to the Bible, whether privately or within the family, clan, or community. It was subsequently applied to the writings of the Church fathers (which are often expositions of the biblical texts.) Because of traditional usage and the difficulty of translating it precisely, the Latin expression (often abbreviated to *lectio*) is commonly used.

In biblical times books were rare and expensive, and most folks couldn't read. Because communal listening rather than individual reading was the most common way our ancestors encountered the Bible, it is also accurate to refer to *lectio divina* as *listening* to the Bible, remembering that St. Paul observed that faith comes through hearing (cf. Rom 10:17). The ancients believed that sound came in through the ear and then proceeded funnel-like into the chamber of the heart.

I refer to *lectio divina* in the subtitle of this chapter as an art because it cannot adequately be defined in technical terms, like a science, and it has a significant subjective element. It is an

art in the sense that our communications with God and others transcend words and can ultimately only be comprehended, however imperfectly, through experience.

## Components of Lectio Divina

In the early Church, praying the Scriptures holistically was described in terms of reading and prayer. With the development of the practice under the desert fathers and mothers and the monks, reading expanded to include the term meditation, and the receptive side of prayer was distinctly identified as contemplation, which in its original Greek, *theoria*, means seeing. In the middle ages, the stage of action was made explicit, though it has always been implied. The following is a brief discussion of each component, which we will elaborate on shortly.

*Reading:* Slowly read a brief portion of Scripture, and if practical, aloud, even in a whisper or murmur, thereby engaging more of the senses.

*Transitional activity, bridging reading to meditation:* Select a word, phrase, sentence, verse, image, or theme that speaks to you. Another way of referring to this is as a “divine sign”, that is, a word or stimulus that speaks to you. Human signs of the times or your life can also be venues through which God speaks to you in daily life.

The Sunday or daily lectionary is a great source for lectio passages because the various readings: Old Testament, psalm, epistle, and Gospel, affirm or in some cases contrast with each other to bring out the fullness and depth of God’s message. This helps us to read the Bible contextually, rather than in a vacuum.

*Meditation:* Repeat the word, stimulus, or inspiration over and over, gradually internalizing it and enabling it to penetrate the subconscious mind. Such rumination is the most

ancient Christian notion of meditation, which was depicted through the image of a cow chewing its cud.

*Optional activity:* In medieval times, monks incorporated the concepts of both practical application (which has always been implied) and discursive reflection, that is, moving from one thought to another. Medieval monks coined the term *reminiscence* to describe the reflexive linking of the biblical word or passage at hand with other biblical themes or passages or life experiences that come to mind. Just as memories build up in a vocation, profession, or relationship, this happens naturally as we become increasingly exposed to and familiar with Scripture.

However, we should be careful not to habitually lose sight of our original word or inspiration and thus enter into a random stream of consciousness with regards to Scripture and our time and conversation with God. If we too quickly move on to other passages, we may lack substance in our lectio and avoid the meaning of the text before us.

*Prayer:* Share our reactions to our word or the biblical passage with God, offering Him our emotions and response in a conversational manner, whether silently or aloud. When doing lectio in a group, we can also share them with others. See *The St. Joseph Guide to the Bible* for a model of group Bible sharing using the practice of lectio divina.

*Contemplation:* Listen receptively for God's response in the silence of our hearts. Pay attention to the Spirit's stirring. Don't expect an angel whispering in your ear. Recalling the term by Brother Lawrence in "*The Practice of the Presence of God*," contemplation is receptive "simple presence" before the Lord. Just "being" with God, gazing at Him so to speak, sharing the moments, as we would with a loved one.

*Action:* Living the word, wrestling with it as we encounter difficulties in understanding and applying it. When we experience the word in action, we typically uncover depths of meaning that we missed in our original reflections. Using the imagery of an obscure parable of Jesus, God's word is a seed that grows, often silently and almost imperceptibly, in a manner paralleling the kingdom of God (cf. Mk 4:26-29; incidentally, the only parable in Mark not found in Matthew or Luke).

Lectio divina is an ongoing process of allowing God and the Church, our brothers and sisters, to make us good soil for the word. The world is the field in which we learn the type of soil we are, and action is the catalyst for our development.

## ***Lectio Divina's Jewish Roots and Parallels***

Like many things within Christianity, *lectio divina* has its roots in Judaism. The Jewish people developed the principles and practices underlying *lectio divina* when the biblical material was in its oral stage, and refined it through the centuries. Eventually the reading process was enlarged to include an interpretive model entitled *pardes*, an acronym meaning orchard or garden that also stands for the four levels of meaning in Scripture:

- *Peshat* (pe-shaht◀): The simple, straightforward (ed. note: Em, in the literature and traditionally, the word straightforward is almost always used to describe Peshat. The same with "clued" below) I'd like to leave them in.), plain, literal, historical meaning.
- *Remez* (re-mez◀): The hinted, "clued", allegorical/symbolic meaning.
- *Derash* (de-rahsh◀): The applied meaning or practical application, such as used in homilies.

- *Sod* (sahd): The mystical or infused (given by God) meaning. (Em, I didn't indent on purpose. "Word" indentation issues. Format as you see fit.)

This rabbinical model continues to be used today within Judaism, and is similar to Christian models for distinguishing levels of meaning in the Bible.

John Cassian, an early desert father, developed a model similar to *pardes* that became the starting point for medieval exegesis (literal interpretation) of Scripture. His categories were:

The literal/historical;

The allegorical or Christological (that is, how passages in the Old Testament in particular refer to Christ in a symbolic, anticipatory, prophetic, sense);

The moral or anthropological (the reader's meaning, what he or she is compelled to do by Scripture);

The anagogical (leading) or eschatological (end times): where the Bible leads us (towards God and heaven.)

The last three senses have traditionally been grouped together as the spiritual senses. Both the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1993 document *On the Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* (II, B) and the Catholic Catechism (115-118) present the above model.

In his medieval classic *Morals on the Book of Job*, Pope St. Gregory the Great organizes his comments according to the historical, allegorical, and moral senses. In his *Summa Theologia*, St. Thomas Aquinas affirms the traditional distinction between the literal and spiritual senses, and divides the latter into the symbolic (allegorical) and moral.

Thus in terms of both methodology and practice, the early Church and later the monastic communities drew upon their Jewish inheritance and peers in developing principles of biblical spirituality and interpretation.

The Benedictines and Cistercians (Trappists) have been major influences in *lectio divina's* development and popularization, while the Carmelites, Franciscans, and even a prominent Jesuit (Cardinal Carlo M. Martini, S.J.) have incorporated their community's spirituality into the model and developed their own customization.

There is no one way to practice lectio divina. As a spirituality, communications, and developmental model it is practiced uniquely by each person, in accordance with their capacities, needs, circumstances, and the movement of the Holy Spirit.

## ***Lectio Divina's Source Material***

When the early Christians read or heard the New Testament writings, they processed them the same way they had the Old Testament writings. As mentioned, *lectio* was applied pre-eminently to the Bible, but also to the writings of the Church Fathers (e.g., Augustine, Gregory the Great, Ambrose, Jerome). Today its application to life is becoming increasingly prominent. My books on time management, stress management, journaling, suffering, care-giving, infertility, gender relations, and potential fulfillment explore the applications of *lectio* to each.

The Eastern Orthodox tradition has a parallel practice called the *Jesus Prayer*, taught in the anonymous spiritual classic *Way of a Pilgrim*, which involves repeating the expression "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me."

Section two of part four of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* advocates *lectio* for both private and group reading of Scripture.

## ***The Role of Repetition***

There is a Jewish proverb that affirms that reading something ninety-nine times is not the same as reading it a hundred times. This is particularly true with respect to the Bible, and in a number of ways:

First, the lectio divina process itself includes repetition of the biblical material, i.e., the “word” that speaks to you.

Second, biblical writers repeat key vocabulary and themes as a way of emphasis. This is an interpretive key that can help us arrive at the literal meaning of the text. Beginning with and seeking the literal meaning of the text is crucial to an authentic experience of lectio divina. Otherwise we will project onto the text our own meaning independent of the literal meaning, and thereby make the text say what we want, rather than what the Holy Spirit intends.

Biblical spirituality is a mixture of exegesis (literal interpretation) and eisegesis (personal applications and projections of our circumstances and perspectives into the text). As long as we integrate and balance, and do not confuse these two elements of biblical spirituality, we can feel confident that we will arrive at the meaning God intends for us, even if it takes awhile to either manifest itself to us. If we persevere, we will gradually and peacefully receive the word and blessing God has for us, even if they come under the guise of trials and suffering (cf. Heb 12:5-7).



Third, sometimes the same story is told in several versions, particularly in the Old Testament and the Gospels. These “doublets” usually indicate multiple sources. Also, it reflects their understanding that a particular event or teaching can be considered from several viewpoints.

## ***The Stages of Lectio Divina in Contemporary Terms***

Utilizing the Bible’s repetitive, affirming, and multiple perspective approach, I will now present the activities and dynamics of lectio divina in contemporary terms using alliteration. In the Psalms, this technique is known as acrostic. It is designed to be mnemonic, that is, facilitate memorization and retention.

*Lectio divina* consists of activities that typically unfold in stages, though not necessarily sequentially. Not only does each person process the Bible and life experience uniquely, but such changes with the circumstances and the person’s development.

Traditionally, *lectio*’s stages have been identified as *reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation, and action*. The following alliterative parallels serve as a starting and reference point for the discussion of the traditional stages that follow.

- \* **Retreat (Refresh/Restore/Renew):** Step back from the hustle-bustle. Make time for daily Sabbath moments.
- \* **Relax:** Come in to God’s presence and get settled in, as you would with a friend.
- \* **Release:** Let God free you of unnecessary anxiety and concerns.
- \* **Read...** slowly, aloud, using all the senses, perhaps following the words with your finger to slow down. This naturally heightens your awareness of the grammatical

elements of the text, which also communicate meaning. Select a word, phrase, image, or verse(s) from the passage that touches or teaches you. This “word” can serve as your bridge to the day, a centering point to return to amid the day’s activities.

- \* **Rhythm:** Enter into the flow of God’s word and Spirit through gentle oscillation (ranging back and forth) between the various activities. Don’t cultivate rigid expectations of what the rhythm should feel like, or worry that you don’t have it. It comes naturally with practice and grace, and it is unique to each person.
- \* **Repeat/Recite:** Gently murmur or recite your “word” repeatedly. This ingrains it in your conscious and subconscious mind as an inspired affirmation.
- \* **Reflect:** Consider what actions or attitudes your “word” is calling you to. What does it mean to you?
- \* **Reminisce:** Your “word” may trigger memories of other biblical or life *passages*. The Hebrew word “*pesach*” from which comes the word “paschal” (i.e., mystery, lamb) refers to the Passover and means *passage*, which is the essence of Christian life: a journey home. *Reminiscence* (the word coined by the medieval monks to describe this practice) helps you connect the various passages, biblical and experiential, in your life. Like reminiscence, passages link things.
- \* **Re-create:** Use your imagination to envision the biblical scene and character(s.) Our objective is to interact with and imaginatively participate in the text holistically, that is, with all our faculties. To use St. Ignatius of Loyola’s terminology, “consider the persons” (identify and perhaps dialogue with them.)

- \* **React:** Share your thoughts and feelings with God, others, or your journal.
- \* **Receive:** Be present to God in silence. Listen. Experience divine consolation.
- \* **Rest:** Cool down as preparation for resuming your activities. Lectio divina is a spiritual exercise, which requires both exertion and relaxation.
- \* **Respond:** Don't just pray, do something. Practice what you have received.
- \* **Realize:** Enjoy the fruits of your labor. Discover God's initiative in your life. Experience your "word" bearing fruit in your life in various degrees as described in the parable of the sower (cf. Mk 4:2-20).

## ***Lectio Divina's Fluid Nature***

*Lectio divina* is an adaptable, flexible model rather than a rigid method. It isn't a mechanical, linear process. It is fluid, personal, and circumstantial. You oscillate between its stages according to your capacities, circumstances, and the movement of the Spirit. We even change our approach to lectio as we grow and our circumstances change. Lectio is a dynamic rather than static practice.

Because the activities of *lectio divina* overlap and are related, it is artificial to distinguish between them rigidly. Lectio divina is a form of prayer, spiritual communications and development, and therefore it is not amenable to precise description. Everyone experiences it differently. Like intimacy between spouses, terminology cannot adequately capture the experience.

For example, reading and meditation are essentially two aspects of the same activity of taking in and responding to a biblical or life passage. Prayer and contemplation are the active