

## Lectio Divina

### III. Modern Europe and America

The modern practice of *lectio divina* (“sacred reading”) represents the recent renaissance of an ancient tradition. A shift occurred from the 16th to the mid-20th century in both the practice and nomenclature of *lectio divina*. This shift eclipsed the older practice in favor of newer “spiritual exercises.” Early leaders of the Reformation had been schooled in both the technique described by the 12th-century Carthusian monk Guigo II (*lectio/meditatio/oratio/contemplatio*) and the fourfold exegetical method associated with the writings of John Cassian (ca. 360–435) and Nicholas of Lyra, (ca. 1270–1349): namely, the literal, allegorical, moral, and anagogical “senses” or levels of scripture. Both John Colet’s lectures on Romans (1497) and Luther’s early lectures on the Psalms (1513) exhibit their authors’ familiarity with medieval exegesis and traditional *lectio divina*.

However, leaders of the counter-reformation encouraged more narrowly-focused techniques influenced principally by the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius Loyola (1491–1556). The so-called Ignatian method did not necessarily assign pride of place to the sacred scriptures as the principal text for meditation. Instead, the ten commandments, the deadly sins and their opposing virtues, the five senses and the works of mercy could replace the Bible as subjects for consideration and prayer. When scripture was employed, Ignatius encouraged the use of the imagination to interiorly visualize biblical scenes, and he emphasized the prior assignment of “subjects” and “points” for studied reflection as well as a concluding resolution by the practitioner to act on the basis of what had been learned. His approach was modified and popularized by Peter of Alcantara (1499–1562) and Francis de Sales (1567–1622). Their techniques of “spiritual reading” or “meditation” were considerably less flexible than the more freewheeling *lectio divina* of old. What had previously been an exercise in prayer facilitated by biblical texts now became a series of carefully-focused mental exercises intended to reinforce doctrinal orthodoxy or emphasize neglected virtue. From the mid-16th through the early 20th centuries it was these exercises rather than the older *lectio divina* that received the most attention in manuals of spiritual formation and in monastic customaries.

The renaissance of traditional *lectio divina* began in the mid-20th century. Theologians, such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri DeLubac, Jean Leclercq, and other advocates of *ressourcement* theology in Roman Catholicism, drew attention to neglected theologies and practices from early Christianity. Von Balthasar (*Origenes*, 1938) helped rekindle interest in Origen and Alexandrian exegesis, effectively rehabilitating the concept of allegory. Jean Leclercq

(*L’Amour des lettres*, 1957) and Henri DeLubac (*Exégèse médiévale*, 1959) demonstrated that the monastic practice of *lectio divina* together with fourfold “spiritual” exegesis had undergirded a monastic literary culture that regarded contemplation as the goal of scriptural study, and which had produced the classical biblical commentaries of Gregory the Great, Bede, John of Ford, and Bernard of Clairvaux.

Renewed interest in early and medieval Christian spirituality together with historical-critical studies of the Rule of Benedict and early monastic sources by Adalbert deVogüé and others reawakened interest among Benedictine and Cistercian monks and nuns in their spiritual inheritances, particularly the interaction between scripture and prayer. Beginning in the 1960s the term *lectio divina* began to appear with increasing frequency in European monastic literature. By the 1970s and 1980s it became more widely used in the English-speaking world, resurfacing once more in monastic constitutions, customaries, and daily calendars.

In 2005 Pope Benedict XVI (*Address*, 2005) enthusiastically recommended *lectio divina* to the Christian faithful, prophesying that its renewed practice would effect “a new spiritual springtime.” Questions posed by participants in the 2008 Synod of Catholic Bishops made it clear that the technique and terminology of *lectio divina* were unfamiliar to substantial segments of the Christian world. Attempts were made at the Synod to clarify and define the practice, but this goal proved elusive, as some bishops were (and remain) convinced that the term *lectio divina* may be used to describe large-group Bible studies which they direct and at which they often preside. In his post-synodal exhortation *Verbum Domini* (2010) Pope Benedict XVI responded to this confusion by describing in detail the traditional private practice (§ 86–87) and by emphasizing its value in ecumenical dialogue (§ 46) and in the spiritual formation of priests, religious, and laity (§ 82–86). Nevertheless, ambiguity persists, and in modern parlance the phrase *lectio divina* may describe the classical monastic practice emphasizing prayer and contemplation as the goal of the exercise. The term may also be used more generally to encompass a wide variety of small or large-group exercises that focus on the study of the Bible and include some element of prayer.

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