LECTIO DIVINA

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One of the most ancient and traditional approaches to Christian contemplation is the practice of *lectio divina*, the art of inwardly repeating and praying a biblical text in such a way that the Word of God gently becomes an experience of union with God. This practice is especially prized by Benedictine monks, nuns, and oblates, who accord it a privileged place in their daily rhythm of prayer and work. *Lectio divina* originated in veneration of the Torah and meditation on the sacred scriptures that characterized ancient Judaism: Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Jesus, described its practice among Jewish monastics in Egypt and Palestine.[1] Christian leaders such as Cyprian of Carthage, Ambrose of Milan, and Jerome eagerly recommended it to the Christian faithful, and thereby attest to its widespread practice in the early church.[2] But it was in early Christian monasticism that the practice of *lectio divina* reached its full flower. Faithful to the traditions of St. Basil and the Egyptian monastics of the desert, St. Benedict encouraged his monks to reserve the best hours of each day for *lectio divina*, a form of prayer that he, unlike some of his predecessors, regarded as a contemplative joy rather than an ascetical burden. [3]

Lectio divina is much more than a method of meditating on the Bible: it is a means of beholding the whole created order charged with God's meaning and purpose. For the monastic or oblate who practices it daily, *lectio divina* becomes a spiritual laboratory in which God is contemplated: first, in the scriptures; then, in the mysterious movements of the human heart; and, finally refracted in the glory of a world beyond the self. Having discovered God present within and beneath the "letter" of the scriptures, the practitioner of *lectio divina* gradually learns to look up from the sacred text into the relationships and events of daily life, and to incorporate them into a rhythm of reflection, prayer, and contemplation that reveals these, too, as "salvation history". With the aid of *lectio divina* it becomes possible to behold God present in interpersonal relationships, daily tasks, and world events, and to consecrate these experiences to God in prayer, along with the inner world of one's temptations, fears, and hopes. The means by which *lectio divina* encourages this prayerful offering of text, heart, and world is perceptible within the structure of the practice itself.

1) THE THEORY OF *LECTIO DIVINA*

Underlying the art of *lectio divina* is the presumption that all human experience entails an alternating rhythm, a life-giving, energizing movement back and forth between the poles of spiritual "activity" and "receptivity". The active pole includes speaking, searching, and working; while receptivity entails listening, perceiving, and quietly being. Well-balanced spiritual practice always consists in a gentle oscillation between these two. The importance of this rhythm is obvious even in activities modern culture considers "secular". For example, wholesome conversation requires both listening and speaking, with appropriate intervals given over to reflecting, commenting, pondering, and asking for information. Similarly, efforts in the workplace are often most productive when they are regularly punctuated by intervals of relaxation and movement, during which the solution to

[1] Philo, *On the Contemplative Life* 13-31, 75-80; *That Every Good Man is Free* 80-85.

[2] Cyprian, *Letter to Donatus* (Letter 1) 14-15; Jerome, *Commentary on Isaiah,* Prol.; Ambrose, *De Officiis* I, 20.

[3] In the *Rule of the Master* (*RM*), St. Benedict's principal source, the practice of *lectio divina* is called "the work of the spirit" (*RM* 50,16). In the Master's monastery this practice occupied the hours between None and Vespers and was evidently regarded as unpleasant work, since the monks were freed both from it and from manual labor on Saturday afternoons as part of their "Sunday rest" (*RM* 75.1,4). Benedict however, in his Rule (*RB*) adds to the Master's daily afternoon *lectio* a morning period between Vigils and Lauds (*RB* 48, 2-13), an interval during which the Master's monks were permitted to return to bed (*RM* 33,16). Far from being dispensed as an onerous burden, *lectio divina* is an important part of Benedict's Sunday observance (*RB* 48,22).

complex problems sometimes emerges unexpectedly. If this balanced rhythm is characteristic of all healthy human endeavor, it follows that our experience of God (who, after all, placed this rhythm within the human heart!) should also include and even celebrate this gentle oscillation. And it is precisely this that the practice of *lectio divina* seeks to do.

2) The Practice of Lectio Divina

The goal of *lectio divina* is, quite simply, prayer. *Lectio divina* is not Bible study in the usual sense of the term, and should not be confused with it. The biblical text that is pondered in *lectio divina* is entirely secondary and instrumental: it is a means rather than en end. The primary purpose of the biblical text is to become transparent, to give way to the loving embrace of the God who originally inspired and who is present, waiting, within the text. Although it is not an exegetical method in the modern sense, *lectio divina* must always proceed from a profound respect for the literal, historical meaning of the text, [4] and should therefore be grounded in the best possible modern exegesis. A trusted modern commentary is often the best place to begin the practice of *lectio divina.* [5]

Since the twelfth century, largely through the influence of Hugh of St. Victor and Guigo the Carthusian, introductions to *lectio divina* customarily describe four (sometimes five) rungs or steps in a spiritual "ladder". [6] While this model may be helpful for beginners, it can give modern readers the false impression of a fixed technique that necessarily proceeds in a stepwise progression. In practice, the order of movement between Guigo's "rungs" is constantly changing, more like a dance or a musical fugue than linear ascent. Rather than steps or rungs, the following four subjects could perhaps be more profitably conceived as recurring "notes" in a changing musical phrase, or as interweaving "colors" in a complex tapestry.

Lectio - reading/listening

The art of *lectio divina* requires the cultivation of inner quiet. Beginning with few minutes of silence or monologistic prayer[7] can help prepare for a method of reading that is radically different from what is taught in modern schools. In antiquity reading, even in private, was generally done aloud. Thus the text was seen, heard, felt as vibration, and even in a sense "tasted" as words were formed on the tongue and lips. While this may no longer be appropriate or possible, it is a reminder that in the ages when *lectio divina* flourished, reading, *lectio*, meant taking a text in, allowing it to literally become part of the self. In *lectio divina* the goal is not to master a text, to mine it for information, but rather to be touched, to be formed by it. Interior quiet facilitates an ability to read gently and attentively, inwardly listening "with the ear of the heart."[8] Like Elijah, who had to ignore wind, fire, and earthquake in order to hear the still, small voice of God (I Kings 19:11-12); the practitioner of *lectio divina* learns to read the biblical text slowly, expectantly, listening for the "faint murmuring sound"

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[4] The most eager early exponents of this ancient art, such as Origen and Jerome, spent considerable portions of their lives in biblical language-study and in quests for the best available manuscripts of the scriptures.

[5] An insightful and practical study of the interrelationship between modern exegesis and *lectio divina* is provided by David Stanley, S.J., "A Suggested Approach to *Lectio Divina*," *American Benedictine Review*, March, 1972, vol. 23 , pp.439-455.

[6] Hugh, a canon and educator, wrote first, emphasizing the intellectual aspects of *meditatio* and including a fifth step, *operatio*, "action" or "work", (Hugh of St. Victor, *Didascalion* 5, 9). Guigo, who knew Hugh's text, adapted it for Carthusian monks by removing the step of "action", to produce his four "rungs" of *lectio, meditatio, oratio* and *contemplatio*, (Guigo II, *Scala Claustralium* 2-3, 12).

[7] Various forms of monologistic ("short phrase") prayer are widely practiced in Christianity. In the early fifth century John Cassian recommended inward repetition of the phrase "O God, come to my assistance; O Lord, make haste to help me" (*Conference* 10). Since the thirteenth century the "Jesus Prayer" ("Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner") has been widely used by monastics in the Christian East. Modern variants of these monologistic methods include "Centering Prayer" and John Main's "Christian Meditation".

[8] Benedict, *RB*, Prologue, 1.

that represents God's invitation to take in a verse or two, then to memorize and repeat the text inwardly.

***Meditatio* - meditation**

The inward gentle repetition of a text that allows it to slowly touch the heart is called *meditatio*; in Hebrew, *hagah*¸in Greek, *meletē.*[9] In Christian antiquity the word *ruminatio* was often used as its equivalent: the image of a ruminant animal quietly chewing its cud became a symbol of the Christian pondering the Word of God and savoring its sweetness. But a much more popular and vivid invitation to *lectio divina* was found in the example of the Virgin Mary who "pondered in her heart" what she saw and heard of Christ (Luke 2:19).[10] This inward pondering, *ruminatio*, on sacred text allows the Word to interact with thoughts, hopes, memories, and desires. As this interaction proceeds, additional words, images, and insights often arise. In many schools of meditation these emerging thoughts and memories are condemned as "distractions" and rejected; but in *lectio divina* the response should be very different. What arises within the heart during *meditatio* is not something alien, intruding from without: these memories and insights are part of the self and are proper matter for that act of consecration that ancient Christian writers called *oratio* - prayer.

***Oratio* - prayer**

"Prayer" is often conceived primarily as dialogue with God: indeed, "conversation with God" (*homilia pros theon*) is an ancient and traditional Christian definition of prayer.[11] In *lectio divina* this dialogue should be characterized by *parrhesia*, a biblical concept that includes frankness and honesty in speech.[12] Through an upwelling of thoughts and images the practice of *meditatio* provides a (not always welcome) glimpse of the self: this in turn should stimulate dialogue with God that is utterly frank and candid. Having seen both what is good and what needs to be changed within the self, one can engage in honest "conversation with God" and offer straightforward petition and intercession for the self and for others.

While the practice of scriptural *meditatio* naturally leads into dialogue with God, it can also encourage another, deeper kind of prayer. Early Christians noted the close connection between the Greek word for prayer, *proseuchē,* and the word for vow, *euchē.*[13] Prayer can be a kind of vow, an act of self-offering in which the self and all of one's relationships, hopes, and concerns are consecrated, presented to God in an act of blessing that transforms and fills what is offered with new meaning.[14] The word of consecration or blessing that effects this offering can be the same phrase that is pondered in *meditatio.* Just as the elements of bread and wine are consecrated at the Eucharist, God invites those who practice *lectio divina* to exercise their Royal Priesthood by consecrating everything that arises during *meditatio,* whether seemingly trivial "distractions", valuable insights, or difficult and pain-filled memories. Over all of these should be gently recited

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[9] In the first Psalm *hagah/meletē/meditatio* (in, respectively, the Hebrew, Septuagint, and Vulgate versions) is commended as the proper use of sacred scripture by the just who "delight in the law of the Lord".

[10] In the medieval western iconographic tradition the Blessed Virgin is always portrayed as engaged in *lectio divina* at the moment of the Annunciation: this symbolically depicts the belief that pondering the scriptures facilitates reception by the soul of Christ, the Word of God.

[11] Clement of Alexandria, *Stromateis*, 7.7.39.6; Evagrius Ponticus, *On Prayer* 3.

[12] Originally used to describe the privilege of Greek citizens to speak openly at public political assemblies, St. Paul and the Letter to the Hebrews recommend prayer characterized by "confidence of access" (*parrēsian,* Eph. 3, 11) and "confidence" (*parrēsias*, Heb 4:15).

[13] Origen, *On Prayer* 4, 1-2.

[14] A vivid example of this consecration-prayer is found in the revelations of St. Gertrude of Helfta: "And all these things together, completely purified of every blemish and wonderfully ennobled in her heart by the heat of her loving desire - namely that these be transformed into submission to their lover - like gold purified in the crucible, these she seemed to present to the Lord." *The Herald of Divine Love,* 4.4,9.

the healing word or phrase God has given in *lectio*. In this *oratio*, this consecration-prayer, the innermost self together with all of one's relationships are touched and changed by the word of God.

***Contemplatio* - contemplation**

Contemplatio has traditionally been understood as an act of "gazing" that entails participation in and communion with the object of contemplation.[15] In the context of *lectio divina* this refers to receptive, wordless prayer; silent gazing and rest in the embrace of the God who has offered his word through *lectio* and *meditatio*. In contemplation the practitioner of *lectio divina* ceases from interior spiritual *doing* and learns simply to *be*, to rest in the presence of a loving Father. Although deeply enjoyable and a source of spiritual refreshment, *contemplatio* should not be regarded as the principal goal or purpose of *lectio divina*. The quality or efficacy of *lectio divina* should not be judged by the amount of time spent in any of its phases. No spiritual technique can guarantee or even prolong true contemplative prayer, which is always a pure grace and often an unexpected gift.[16] Instead, the awareness that this gift is sometimes offered can prepare the practitioner of *lectio divina* to cease using words when words are unnecessary, and then return joyfully to the sacred text or to *ruminatio* when the (often brief!) moment of silent *contemplatio* has passed.

3) Lectio Divina as a Laboratory of Christian contemplation

The regular practice of *lectio divina* can help liberate the practitioner from a narrow modern definition of contemplation. In early Christianity the natural oscillation, described above, between "active" and "receptive" modes of spiritual experience slowly came to be associated with Platonic and Aristotelian notions of the active life (*bios praktikos*) and contemplative life (*bios theoretikos*). It was not a question of choosing or specializing in one or the other: these "lives" were presumed to interact in every person in a mutually reinforcing rhythm. The "active life" consists chiefly of the moral work of rooting out vices and practicing virtue. Contemplation entails a second balanced movement between two mutually-enhancing poles: *theoria physikē*, kataphatic, image- and word-filled contemplation of God in creation; and *theologia*, apophatic, wordless apprehension of God beyond all concepts and images.[17] Both modes of contemplation were considered necessary for a well-balanced spirituality.[18] Unfortunately, some spiritual authors today so emphasize apophatic practices of imageless, wordless prayer that *theoria physikē*, the contemplation of God in text, story, history, and symbol, is either neglected or not regarded as "contemplation" at all. *Lectio divina*, on the contrary, teaches the practitioner to delight in moving back and forth between active and

[15] The Latin word *contemplatio* is the equivalent of the Greek *theoria*. Under the influence of Plato *theoria* came to mean an exalted spiritual "seeing", an experience of "beholding" the truer world of the Forms that lies beyond the limited, material world perceptible by the senses (Plato, *Phaedrus* 7; the "Parable of the Cave", *Republic* 7.).

[16] The terms "contemplative prayer" and "contemplation" are sometimes loosely used by modern spiritual authors to describe states attained through techniques that encourage imageless, wordless attentiveness to God, often employing monologistic prayer formulae (see footnote 7 above). Such apophatic attentiveness has sometimes been described in Christian ascetical and mystical theology as "prayer of quiet;" and it can, indeed, be spiritually beneficial. However, such states are not the equivalent of *contemplatio/theoria* as these were understood by early Christian monastic and medieval spiritual writers. An analogy with interpersonal relationships may be helpful. In committed, loving relationships moments naturally and spontaneously arise when words are unnecessary and silent communion is preferable. It becomes possible during such moments simply to be with and to silently enjoy the presence of the beloved. However, such moments cannot be artificially induced or prolonged through any technique. Rather, what can and should be sought is awareness that such moments do occasionally arise, together with a willingness to enjoy them. It is, not surprisingly, the same in one's relationship with God. The gift of *contemplatio* cannot be summoned or induced through spiritual practices: it can only be gratefully enjoyed when God offers it.

[17] Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos* 1-3, 92; *Gnostikos* 20; *On Prayer* 57, 58, 86.

[18] A good example of this balance is the sixth-century author Dionysius the Areopagite, who introduced the terms "apophatic" and "kataphatic" into Christian theology. He wrote *The Mystical Theology*, perhaps the most famous apophatic Christian treatise on *theologia*, as well as *The Divine Names, The Celestial Hierarchies, and The Ecclesiastical Hierarchies*, which celebrate esthetic and intellectual complexity through the splendor of God's presence in the church's sacraments, liturgical rites, and the ranks of church leadership

receptive experiences of God. In *lectio* the grandeur and complexity of biblical salvation history slowly focuses down on a single biblical phrase; the ruminated phrase then evokes complex personal responses. These responses, in turn, invite prayer, sometimes in words, sometimes in a simple act of consecration. At intervals one senses an opportunity to simply rest in the presence of God; then the invitation arises to return to the sacred text. As this rhythm of *lectio divina* become natural and familiar, one's understanding of "contemplation" expands. One discovers that the same rhythm of listening and praying that reveals God in the scriptures can also be applied to that portion of salvation history that is one's own journey of faith: the glory of God becomes perceptible in both the macrocosm of the universe and in the microcosm of one's own heart.

This expanded experience of contemplation learned in the laboratory of *lectio divina* offers many possibilities. It renders comprehensible spiritual texts that would otherwise seem opaque. When read as the record of another's *lectio divina*, patristic and medieval biblical commentaries no longer seem awkward and tangential; they become, instead, treasured gifts from distant spiritual friends. Ancient enthusiasm for symbolism, architecture, and commentaries on the liturgy begin to make sense when one recognizes in their authors kindred spirits who experienced the meeting of microcosm and macrocosm in rituals and sacred places. And finally, the wisdom distilled in the ascetical literature of early monasticism becomes vibrant with the discovery that their great art of "discerning thoughts" consisted in "*lectio* on life", a reading of the heart that laid bare both the temptations (*logismoi*) and divine purposes (*logoi*) present in all human choices.

4) Concluding Thoughts on Matter, Time, and Space

The question is often asked whether sacred scripture is the only proper matter for *lectio divina.* Throughout the history of Christian monasticism the Bible has always retained "pride of place" during the time set aside for *lectio divina.* But it is also true that certain other texts can be read in the same spirit, and will enhance one's practice of biblical *lectio*. Benedict particularly commended to his monks the *Institutes* and *Conferences* of John Cassian, the *Rule of Basil*, and the *Lives* and *Sayings* of the desert fathers and mothers.[19] All these have in common that they can in some sense be regarded as the fruit of other Christians' *lectio divina.* They reflect the wisdom and experience of monks and nuns whose spiritual lives were formed and shaped by the regular praying of scripture, and they frequently cite the Bible or (in the case of the desert texts) regularly allude to biblical models and images. It could be said that they "whet the appetite" for biblical *lectio*, they encourage the reader to frequently turn back to the biblical text. The same can be said of the biblical commentaries of Origen, John Chrysostom, Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Bede: these were often read together with (but never replaced!) the Bible in monastic *lectio divina.* There are modern authors whose works can similarly enhance the oblates' or monastics' experience of *lectio*: perhaps a simple rule of thumb is the question, "does this encourage me to return to the Bible?" If the answer is "yes", then the text is fit matter for *lectio divina*.

It needs to be frankly admitted that oblates who are able to set aside daily time for *lectio divina* have attained a much higher level of ascetical virtue than their monastic sisters and brothers. Those who are privileged to live within monasteries experience an environment where *lectio divina* is encouraged and protected: their oblate sisters and brothers enjoy no such luxury. Life "in the world" and the responsibilities of family guarantee that time intended for prayer and *lectio divina* will regularly have to be sacrificed. For this reason it is important for oblates to have alternative "quick and simple" approaches to *lectio divina* for those all-too-frequent days when minor emergencies arise. One simple approach is to place the text in a prominent place where it can be glanced at, if only briefly, while one dresses in the morning. Oblates whose faith communities emphasize liturgical worship often make use of the lectionary in their *lectio divina.* It is not difficult to leave a lectionary open on a desk or a shelf, and to glance at some portion of the day's texts during such

[19] Benedict, RB 73, 5.

mundane preparations as brushing one's teeth. It is surprising how little time it takes under such circumstances for a word or phrase to present itself for *meditatio*. Even when time for extended *meditatio* and prayer is not available, the word that was taken in can serve as a means of consecrating events and relationships throughout the day. And for those whose work involves the use of a computer, websites such as http://www.universalis.com permit the laborer to periodically glance at the day's liturgical texts throughout the workday.

4) For Further Reading:

The two most important ancient texts on *lectio divina* are:

1) John Cassian, *Conference 14*, "The First Conference of Abba Nesteros - On Spiritual Knowledge". A literal Victorian translation of this text may be downloaded from the Internet in volume 11 of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* (http://www.ccel.org) The best modern translation is by Boniface Ramsey, *John Cassian: The Conferences*, (Paulist, 1997).
2) *The Ladder of Monks* by Guigo II, (Cistercian, 2004). The classical description of the medieval monastic practice of lectio divina.

Modern Introductions to *Lectio Divina*

1) *Teach us to Pray*, by Andre Louf, , O.C.S.O., (Cowly, 1992). A rich, readable introduction to monastic spiritual practices, including *lectio divina;* praying the Liturgy of the Hours (the Divine Office); and monogistic prayer (the Jesus Prayer). Worth re-reading regularly.
2) *Sacred Reading*, by Michael Casey, O.C.S.O., (Ligouri, 1996). An excellent, complete introduction to the history and practice of *lectio divina.*
3) *Too Deep for Words*, by Thelma Hall (Paulist, 1988). Basic introduction with many recommended passages for daily *lectio divina.*
4) *Accepting the Embrace of God*, *The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, by Luke Dysinger, O.S.B.. Downloadable from the Internet, this introduction to *lectio divina* includes descriptions of private and group *lectio divina* and an exercise of "lectio on life" (http://www.valyermo.com/ld-art.html).
5) *Reading with God: Lectio Divina*, by David Foster, O.S.B. (Continuum, International, 2005).