

LECTIO DIVINA

Praying *the* Scriptures

ST. ANDREW'S ABBEY

Fr. Luke Dysinger, O.S.B.

FRIDAY

5:30 pm *Vespers*
6:10 Supper in silence with music
6:45-7:30 **INTRODUCTORY CONFERENCE**
7:30 *Compline*

SATURDAY

6:00 *Vigils*
7:30 *Lauds*
8:00 Breakfast in silence
9:30 **MORNING CONFERENCE**
12:00 pm *Mass*
1:00 Lunch
3:30 **AFTERNOON CONFERENCE**
5:30 *First Vespers of Sunday*
6:10 Supper
6:45-7:30 **EVENING CONFERENCE**
7:30 *Vigil of Sunday*

SUNDAY

7:30 *Lauds*
8:00 Breakfast in silence
9:30 **CONCLUDING CONFERENCE**
12:00 *Mass*
1:00 Lunch
2:00 Departure

LECTIO DIVINA

Luke Dysinger, O.S.B.

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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 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 an 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,

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).

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 prayer⁷ 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” 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.

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.

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.

Oratio - prayer

“Prayer” is often conceived primarily as dialogue with God: indeed, “conversation with God” (*homilia pro 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 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”

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” (*parrēsia*, Eph. 3, 11) and “confidence” (*parrēsia*, 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.

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.

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 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

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

¹⁹ Benedict, RB 73, 5.

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 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).

ACCEPTING THE EMBRACE *of* GOD: The Ancient Art of *Lectio Divina*

by Fr. Luke Dysinger, O.S.B., SAINT ANDREW'S ABBEY

The Process of *Lectio Divina*

A very ancient art, practiced at one time by all Christians, is the technique known as *lectio divina* - a slow, contemplative praying of the Scriptures which enables the Bible, the Word of God, to become a means of **union** with God. This ancient practice has been kept alive in the Christian monastic tradition, and is one of the precious treasures of Benedictine monastics and oblates. Together with the Liturgy and daily manual labor, time set aside in a special way for *lectio divina* enables us to discover in our daily life an underlying spiritual rhythm. Within this rhythm we discover an increasing ability to offer more of ourselves and our relationships to the Father, and to accept the embrace that God is continuously extending to us in the person of his Son Jesus Christ.

***Lectio* - reading/listening**

The art of *lectio divina* begins with cultivating the ability to **listen deeply**, to hear “with the ear of our hearts” as St. Benedict encourages us in the Prologue to the Rule. When we read the Scriptures we should try to imitate the prophet Elijah. We should allow ourselves to become women and men who are able to listen for the still, small voice of God (*I Kings 19:12*); the “faint murmuring sound” which is God's word for **us**, God's voice touching **our** hearts. This gentle listening is an “atunement” to the presence of God in that special part of God's creation which is the Scriptures.

The cry of the prophets to ancient Israel was the joy-filled command to “Listen!” “Sh'ma Israel: Hear, O Israel!” In *lectio divina* we, too, heed that command and turn to the Scriptures, knowing that we must “hear” - listen - to the voice of God, which often speaks very softly. In order to hear someone speaking softly we must learn to be silent. We must learn to love silence. If we are constantly speaking or if we are surrounded with noise, we cannot hear gentle sounds. The practice of *lectio divina*, therefore, requires that we first quiet down in order to hear God's word to us. This is the first step of *lectio divina*, appropriately called *lectio* - reading.

The reading or listening which is the first step in *lectio divina* is very different from the speed reading which modern Christians apply to newspapers, books and even to the Bible. *Lectio* is reverential listening; listening both in a spirit of silence and of awe. We are listening for the still, small voice of God that will speak to us personally - not loudly, but intimately. In *lectio* we read slowly, attentively, gently listening to hear a word or phrase that is God's word for us this day

***Meditatio* - meditation**

Once we have found a word or a passage in the Scriptures which speaks to us in a personal way, we must take it in and “ruminate” on it. The image of the ruminant animal quietly chewing its cud was used in antiquity as a symbol of the Christian pondering the Word of God. Christians have always seen a scriptural invitation to *lectio divina* in the example of the Virgin Mary “pondering in her heart” what she saw and heard of Christ (*Luke 2:19*). For us today these images are a reminder that we must take in the word - that is, memorize it - and while gently repeating it to ourselves, allow it to interact with our thoughts, our hopes, our memories, our desires. This is the second step or stage in *lectio divina* - *meditatio*. Through *meditatio* we allow God's word to become His word for us, a word that touches us and affects us at our deepest levels.

***Oratio* - prayer**

The third step in *lectio divina* is *oratio* - prayer: prayer understood both as dialogue with God, that is, as loving conversation with the One who has invited us into His embrace; and as consecration, prayer as the priestly offering to God of parts of ourselves that we have not previously believed God wants. In this consecration-prayer we allow the word that we have taken in and on which we are pondering to touch and change our deepest selves. Just as a priest consecrates the elements of bread and wine at the Eucharist, God invites us in *lectio divina* to hold up our most difficult and pain-filled experiences to Him, and to gently recite over them the healing word or phrase He has given us in our *lectio* and *meditatio*. In this *oratio*, this consecration-prayer, we allow our real selves to be touched and changed by the word of God.

***Contemplatio* - contemplation**

Finally, we simply rest in the presence of the One who has used His word as a means of inviting us to accept His transforming embrace. No one who has ever been in love needs to be reminded that there are moments in loving relationships when words are unnecessary. It is the same in our relationship with God. Wordless, quiet rest in the presence of the One Who loves us has a name in the Christian tradition - *contemplatio*, contemplation. Once again we practice silence, letting go of our own words; this time simply enjoying the experience of being in the presence of God.

The Underlying Rhythm of *Lectio Divina*

If we are to practice *lectio divina* effectively, we must travel back in time to an understanding that today is in danger of being almost completely lost. In the Christian past the words *action* (or *practice*, from the Greek *praktikos*) and *contemplation* did not describe different kinds of Christians engaging (or not engaging) in different forms of prayer and apostolates. Practice and contemplation were understood as the two poles of our underlying, ongoing spiritual rhythm: a gentle oscillation back and forth between spiritual “activity” with regard to God and “receptivity.”

Practice - spiritual activity - referred in ancient times to our active cooperation with God's grace in rooting out vices and allowing the virtues to flourish. The direction of spiritual activity was not outward in the sense of an apostolate, but **inward** - down into the depths of the soul where the Spirit of God is constantly transforming us, refashioning us in God's image. The *active life* is thus coming to see who we truly are and allowing ourselves to be remade into what God intends us to become.

In contemplation we cease from interior spiritual *doing* and learn simply to *be*, that is to rest in the presence of our loving Father. Just as we constantly move back and forth in our exterior lives between speaking and listening, between questioning and reflecting, so in our spiritual lives we must learn to enjoy the refreshment of simply *being* in God's presence, an experience that naturally alternates (if we let it!) with our spiritual *practice*.

In ancient times contemplation was not regarded as a goal to be achieved through some method of prayer, but was simply accepted with gratitude as God's recurring gift. At intervals the Lord invites us to cease from speaking so that we can simply rest in his embrace. This is the pole of our inner spiritual rhythm called contemplation.

How different this ancient understanding is from our modern approach! Instead of recognizing that we all gently oscillate back and forth between spiritual activity and receptivity, between practice and contemplation, we today tend to set contemplation before ourselves as a goal - something we imagine we can achieve through some spiritual technique. We must be willing to sacrifice our “goal-oriented” approach if we are to practice *lectio divina*, because *lectio divina* has no other goal than spending time with God through the medium of His word. The amount of time we spend in any aspect of *lectio divina*, whether it be rumination, consecration or contemplation depends on God's Spirit, not on us. *Lectio divina* teaches us to savor and delight in all the different flavors of God's presence, whether they be active or receptive modes of experiencing Him.

In *lectio divina* we offer ourselves to God; and we are people in motion. In ancient times this inner spiritual motion was described as a helix - an ascending spiral. Viewed in only two dimensions it appears as a circular motion back and forth; seen with the added dimension of

time it becomes a helix, an ascending spiral by means of which we are drawn ever closer to God. The whole of our spiritual lives were viewed in this way, as a gentle oscillation between spiritual activity and receptivity by means of which God unites us ever closer to Himself. In just the same way the steps or stages of *lectio divina* represent an oscillation back and forth between these spiritual poles. In *lectio divina* we recognize our underlying spiritual rhythm and discover many different ways of experiencing God's presence - many different ways of praying.

The Practice of *Lectio Divina*

Private *lectio divina*

Choose a text of the Scriptures that you wish to pray. Many Christians use in their daily *lectio divina* one of the readings from the Eucharistic liturgy for the day; others prefer to slowly work through a particular book of the Bible. It makes no difference which text is chosen, as long as one has no set goal of “covering” a certain amount of text: the amount of text “covered” is in God's hands, not yours.

Place yourself in a comfortable position and allow yourself to become silent. Some Christians focus for a few moments on their breathing; other have a beloved “prayer word” or “prayer phrase” they gently recite in order to become interiorly silent. For some the practice known as “centering prayer” makes a good, brief introduction to *lectio divina*. Use whatever method is best for you and allow yourself to enjoy silence for a few moments.

Then turn to the text and read it slowly, gently. Savor each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the “still, small voice” of a word or phrase that somehow says, “I am for you today.” Do not expect lightening or ecstasies. In *lectio divina* God is teaching us to listen to Him, to seek Him in silence. He does not reach out and grab us; rather, He softly, gently invites us ever more deeply into His presence.

Next take the word or phrase into yourself. Memorize it and slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories and ideas. Do not be afraid of “distractions.” Memories or thoughts are simply parts of yourself which, when they rise up during *lectio divina*, are asking to be given to God along with the rest of your inner self. Allow this inner pondering, this rumination, to invite you into dialogue with God.

Then, speak to God. Whether you use words or ideas or images or all three is not important. Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. And give to Him what you have discovered in yourself during your experience of *meditatio*. Experience yourself as the priest that you are. Experience God using the word or phrase that He has given you as a means of blessing, of transforming the ideas and memories, which your pondering on His word

has awakened. Give to God what you have found within your heart.

Finally, simply rest in God's embrace. And when He invites you to return to your pondering of His word or to your inner dialogue with Him, do so. Learn to use words when words are helpful, and to let go of words when they no longer are necessary. Rejoice in the knowledge that God is with you in both words and silence, in spiritual activity and inner receptivity.

Sometimes in *lectio divina* one will return several times to the printed text, either to savor the literary context of the word or phrase that God has given, or to seek a new word or phrase to ponder. At other times only a single word or phrase will fill the whole time set aside for *lectio divina*. It is not necessary to anxiously assess the quality of one's *lectio divina* as if one were "performing" or seeking some goal: *lectio divina* has no goal other than that of being in the presence of God by praying the Scriptures.

***Lectio Divina* as a group exercise**

In the churches of the Third World where books are rare, a form of corporate *lectio divina* is becoming common in which a text from the Scriptures is pondered by Christians praying together in a group.²⁰

This form of *lectio divina* works best in a group of between four and eight people. A group leader coordinates the process and facilitates sharing. The same text from the Scriptures is read out three times, followed each time by a period of silence and an opportunity for each member of the group to share the fruit of her or his *lectio*.

The first reading (the text is actually read twice on this occasion) is for the purpose of hearing a word or passage that touches the heart. When the word or phrase is found, it is silently taken in, and gently recited and pondered during the silence which follows. After the silence each person shares which word or phrase has touched his or her heart.

The second reading (by a member of the opposite sex from the first reader) is for the purpose of "hearing" or "seeing" Christ in the text. Each ponders the word that has touched the heart and asks where the word or phrase touches his or her life that day. In other words, how is Christ the Word touching his own experience, his own life? How are the various members of the group seeing or hearing Christ reach out to them through the text? Then, after the silence, each member of the group shares what he or she has "heard" or "seen."

The third and final reading is for the purpose of experiencing Christ "calling us forth" into *doing* or *being*. Members ask themselves what Christ in the text is calling them to *do* or to *become* today or this week. After the silence, each shares for the last time; and the exercise

concludes with each person praying for the person on the right.

Those who regularly practice this method of praying and sharing the Scriptures regularly find it to be an excellent way of developing trust within a group; it also is an excellent way of consecrating projects and hopes to Christ before more formal group meetings. A single-sheet summary of this method for group *lectio divina* is appended at the end of this article.

***Lectio Divina* on life**

In the ancient tradition *lectio divina* was understood as being one of the most important ways in which Christians experience God in creation.²¹ After all, the Scriptures are part of creation! If one is daily growing in the art of finding Christ in the pages of the Bible, one naturally begins to discover Him more clearly in aspects of the other things He has made. This includes, of course, our own personal history.

Our own lives are fit matter for *lectio divina*. Very often our concerns, our relationships, our hopes and aspirations naturally intertwine with our pondering on the Scriptures, as has been described above. But sometimes it is fitting to simply sit down and "read" the experiences of the last few days or weeks in our hearts, much as we might slowly read and savor the words of Scripture in *lectio divina*. We can attend "with the ear of our hearts" to our own memories, listening for God's gentle presence in the events of our lives. We thus allow ourselves the joy of experiencing Christ reaching out to us through our own memories. Our own personal story becomes "salvation history."

For those who are new to the practice of *lectio divina* a group experience of "*lectio* on life" can provide a helpful introduction. An approach that has been used at workshops at St. Andrew's Abbey is detailed at the end of this article. Like the experience of *lectio divina* shared in community, this group experience of *lectio* on life can foster relationships in community and enable personal experiences to be consecrated - offered to Christ - in a concrete way.

However, unlike scriptural *lectio divina* shared in community, this group *lectio* on life contains more silence than sharing. The role of group facilitators or leaders is important, since they will be guiding the group through several periods of silence and reflection without the "interruption" of individual sharing until the end of the exercise. Since the experiences we choose to "read" or "listen to" may be intensely personal, it is

²⁰This approach to group *lectio divina* was introduced at St. Andrew's Abbey by Doug and Norvene Vest. It is used as part of the Benedictine Spirituality for Laity workshop conducted at the Abbey each summer.

²¹Christian life was understood as a gentle oscillation between the poles of *practice* and *contemplation*, as described above; however, contemplation was understood in two ways. First was *theoria physike*, the contemplation of God in creation - God in "the many;" second was *theologia*, the contemplation of God in Himself without images or words - God as "The One." *Lectio divina* was understood as an important part of the contemplation of God in His creation.

important in this group exercise to safeguard privacy by making sharing completely optional.

In brief, one begins with restful silence, then gently reviews the events of a given period of time. One seeks an event, a memory, which touches the heart just as a word or phrase in scriptural *lectio divina* does. One then recalls the setting, the circumstances; one seeks to discover how God seemed to be present or absent from the experience. One then offers the event to God and rests for a time in silence.

Conclusion

Lectio divina is an ancient spiritual art that is being rediscovered in our day. It is a way of allowing the Scriptures to become again what God intended that they should be - a means of uniting us to Himself. In *lectio divina* we discover our own underlying spiritual rhythm. We experience God in a gentle oscillation back and forth between spiritual activity and receptivity, in the movement from practice into contemplation and back again into spiritual practice.

Lectio divina teaches us about the God who truly loves us. In *lectio divina* we dare to believe that our loving Father continues to extend His embrace to us today. And His embrace is real. In His word we experience ourselves as personally loved by God; as the recipients of a word which He gives uniquely to each of us whenever we turn to Him in the Scriptures.

Finally, *lectio divina* teaches us about ourselves. In *lectio divina* we discover that there is no place in our hearts, no interior corner or closet that cannot be opened and offered to God. God teaches us in *lectio divina* what it means to be members of His royal priesthood - a people called to consecrate all of our memories, our hopes and our dreams to Christ.

APPENDIX:

Two Approaches to Group *Lectio Divina*

1) *LECTIO DIVINA* Shared in Community

Listening for the Gentle Touch of Christ the Word

(The Literal Sense)

1. One person reads aloud (twice) the passage of scripture, as others are attentive to some segment that is especially meaningful to them.
2. **Silence** for 1-2 minutes. Each hears and silently repeats a word or phrase that attracts.
3. Sharing aloud: [A word or phrase that has attracted each person]. A simple statement of one or a few words. **No elaboration.**

How Christ the Word speaks to ME

(The Allegorical Sense)

4. Second reading of same passage by another person.
5. **Silence** for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "Where does the content of this reading touch my life today?"
6. Sharing aloud: **Briefly:** "I hear, I see..."

What Christ the Word Invites me to DO

(The Moral Sense)

7. Third reading by still another person.
8. **Silence** for 2-3 minutes. Reflect on "I believe that God wants me to today/this week."
9. Sharing aloud: at somewhat greater length the results of each one's reflection. [Be especially aware of what is shared by the person to your right.]
10. After full sharing, pray for the person to your right.

Note: Anyone may "pass" at any time. If instead of sharing with the group you prefer to pray silently, simply state this aloud and conclude your silent prayer with *Amen*.

2) *LECTIO ON LIFE: Applying Lectio Divina to my personal Salvation History*

Purpose: to apply a method of prayerful reflection to a life/work incident (instead of to a scripture passage).

Listening - Gently Remembering

(Lectio - Reading)

1. Each person quiets the body and mind: relax, sit comfortably but alert, close eyes, attune to breathing...
2. Each person gently reviews events, situations, sights, encounters that have happened since the beginning of the retreat/or during the last month at work.

Gently Ruminating, Reflecting

(Meditatio - Meditation)

3. Each person allows the self to focus on one such offering.
 - a) Recollect the setting, sensory details, sequence of events, etc.
 - b) Notice where the greatest energy seemed to be evoked. Was there a turning point or shift?
 - c) In what ways did God seem to be present? To what extent was I aware then? Now?

Prayerful Consecration, Blessing

(Oratio - Prayer)

4. Use a word or phrase from the Scriptures to inwardly consecrate - to offer up to God in prayer - the incident and interior reflections. Allow God to accept and bless them as your gift

Accepting Christ's Embrace; Silent Presence to the Lord

(Contemplatio - Contemplation)

5. Remain in silence for some period.

Sharing our *Lectio* Experience with Each Other

(Operatio - Action; works)

6. Leader calls the group back into "community."
7. All share briefly (or remain in continuing silence).

**From the Letter to Donatus
by St. Cyprian of Carthage (d.258)**

[English translation by E. Wallis; *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* v. V, pp. 279-280. Latin text in *Corpus Christianorum Series Latina* v. IIIA, p.12.]

(14)...

As the sun shines spontaneously,
as the day gives light,
as the fountain flows,
as the shower yields moisture,
so does the heavenly Spirit
infuse itself into us.

When the soul, **in its gaze into heaven**, has **recognized its Author**, it **rises higher than the sun**, and far transcends all this earthly power, and **begins to be that which it believes itself to be**.

(15) Do you, however, whom the celestial warfare has enlisted in the spiritual camp, only observe a discipline uncorrupted and chastened in the virtues of religion.

Be constant as well
in prayer as in reading;
now speak with God,
now let God speak with you,
let Him instruct you in His precepts,
let Him direct you.²²

Whom He has made rich,
none shall make poor;
for, in fact, there can be no poverty to him
whose breast has once been supplied with
heavenly food.

Ceilings enriched with gold, and houses adorned with mosaics of costly marble, will seem mean to you, now when you know that it is you yourself who are rather to be perfected, you who are rather to be adorned, and that that dwelling in which God has dwelt as in a temple, in which the Holy Spirit has begun to make His abode, is of more importance than all others.

²² Sit tibi uel

oratio adsidua uel lectio.
Nunc cum Deo loquere,
nunc Deus tecum.
Ille te praeceptis suis instruat,
ille disponat

**From the Dogmatic Constitution on
Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)
of the Second Vatican Council**
[tr. Flannery, (Collegeville) pp. 754 & 764]

(8) The Tradition that comes from the apostles makes progress in the Church, with the help of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on. This comes about in various ways. It comes through the **contemplation and study of believers** who ponder these things in their hearts (cf. Lk. 2:19 and 51). It comes from the **intimate sense of spiritual realities which they experience**. And it comes from the preaching of those who have received, along with their right of succession in the episcopate, the sure charism of truth. Thus, as the centuries go by, the Church is always advancing towards the plenitude of divine truth, until eventually the words of God are fulfilled in her.

(25) ...all clerics ... should immerse themselves in the Scriptures by **constant sacred reading and diligent study**...

Likewise the sacred Synod forcefully and specifically exhorts **all the Christian faithful, especially those who live the religious life**, to learn “the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 3:8) by **frequent reading** of the Divine Scriptures. “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”.²³

Therefore let them go gladly to the sacred text itself, whether in the sacred liturgy, which is full of the divine words, or in **devout reading**, or in such suitable exercises and various other helps which, with the approval and guidance of the pastors of the Church, are happily spreading everywhere in our day.

Let them remember, however, that **prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture so that a dialogue takes place between God and man**.²⁴ For “We **speak** to him when we **pray**; we **listen** to him when we **read** the divine oracles.”²⁵

²³ St. Jerome, *Comm in Is., Prol.*: PL 24, 17.

²⁴ Meminerint autem **orationem** concomitari debere Sacrae Scripturae **lectionem**, ut fiat colloquium inter Deum et hominem

²⁵ “illum **alloquimur**, cum **oramus**; illum **audimus**, cum divina **legimus** oracula.” St. Ambrose, *De Officiis ministrorum* I, 20, 88: PL 16,50

Pope Benedict XVI” VERBUM DOMINI *On The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church* Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of Benedict XVI. September 30, 2010

The prayerful reading of sacred Scripture and “lectio divina”

86. **THE** Synod frequently insisted on the need for a prayerful approach to the sacred text as a fundamental element in the spiritual life of every believer, in the various ministries and states in life, with particular reference to *lectio divina*.²⁹⁰ (*Propositiones* 9 and 22.)

The word of God is at the basis of all authentic Christian spirituality. The Synod Fathers thus took up the words of the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*:

“ Let the faithful go gladly to the sacred text itself, whether in the sacred liturgy, which is full of the divine words, or in devout reading, or in such suitable exercises and various other helps which, with the approval and guidance of the pastors of the Church, are happily spreading everywhere in our day. Let them remember, however, that prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture ”.²⁹¹ (No. 25.)

The Council thus sought to reappropriate the great patristic tradition which had always recommended approaching the Scripture in dialogue with God. As Saint Augustine puts it: “Your prayer is the word you speak to God. When you read the Bible, God speaks to you; when you pray, you speak to God ”.²⁹² (*Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 85, 7: PL 37, 1086.)

ORIGEN, one of the great masters of this way of reading the Bible, maintains that understanding Scripture demands, even more than study, closeness to Christ and prayer. Origen was convinced, in fact, that the best way to know God is through love, and that there can be no authentic *scientia Christi* apart from growth in his love. In his *Letter to Gregory*, the great Alexandrian theologian gave this advice:

[...] “Devote yourself to the *lectio* of the divine Scriptures; apply yourself to this with perseverance. [...]

Do your reading with the intent of believing in and pleasing God. If during the *lectio* you encounter a closed door, knock and it will be opened to you by that guardian of whom Jesus said, ‘The gatekeeper will open it for him’.

By applying yourself in this way to *lectio divina*, search diligently and with unshakable trust in God for the meaning of the divine Scriptures, which is hidden in great fullness within.

You ought not, however, to be satisfied merely with knocking and seeking: to understand the things of God, what is absolutely necessary is *oratio*. For this reason, the Saviour told us not only: ‘Seek and you will find’, and ‘Knock and it shall be opened to you’, but also added, ‘Ask and you shall receive’ ”.²⁹³ (Origen, *Epistola ad Gregorium*, 3: PG 11, 92.)

In this regard, however, one must *avoid the risk of an individualistic approach*, and remember that God’s word is given to us precisely to build communion, to unite us in the Truth along our path to God. While it is a word addressed to each of us personally, it is also a word which builds community, which builds the Church. Consequently, *the sacred text must always be approached in the communion of the Church*. In effect, “ a communal reading of Scripture is extremely important, because the living subject in the sacred Scriptures is the People of God, it is the Church... Scripture does not belong to the past, because its subject, the People of God inspired by God himself, is always the same, and therefore the word is always alive in the living subject. As such, it is important to read and experience sacred Scripture in communion with the Church, that is, with all the great witnesses to this word, beginning with the earliest Fathers up to the saints of our own day, up to the present-day magisterium ”.²⁹⁴ (Benedict XVI, *Address to the Students of the Roman Major Seminary* (19 February 2007): AAS 99 (2007), 253-254.)

For this reason, *the privileged place* for the prayerful reading of sacred Scripture *is the liturgy*, and particularly *the Eucharist*, in which, as we celebrate the Body and Blood of Christ in the sacrament, the word itself is present and at work in our midst. In some sense the prayerful reading of the Bible, personal and communal, must always be related to the Eucharistic celebration. Just as the adoration of the Eucharist prepares for, accompanies and follows the liturgy of the Eucharist,²⁹⁵ so too prayerful reading, personal and communal, prepares for, accompanies and deepens what the Church celebrates when she proclaims the word in a liturgical setting. By so closely relating *lectio* and liturgy, we can better grasp the criteria which should guide this practice in the area of pastoral care and in the spiritual life of the People of God.

²⁹⁵ (Cf. ID., Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), 66; AAS 99 (2007), 155-156.)

87. The documents produced before and during the Synod mentioned a number of methods for a faith-filled and fruitful approach to sacred Scripture. Yet the greatest attention was paid to *lectio divina*, which is truly “capable of opening up to the faithful the treasures of God’s word, but also of bringing about an encounter with Christ, the living word of God ”.²⁹⁶ (*Final Message*, III, 9.)

I would like here to review the basic steps of this procedure.

[1] It opens with the reading (*lectio*) of a text, which leads to a desire to understand its true content: *what does the biblical text say in itself?*

Without this, there is always a risk that the text will become a pretext for never moving beyond our own ideas.

[2] Next comes meditation (*meditatio*), which asks: *what does the biblical text say to us?*

Here, each person, individually but also as a member of the community, must let himself or herself be moved and challenged.

[3] Following this comes prayer (*oratio*), which asks the question: *what do we say to the Lord in response to his word?*

Prayer, as petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise, is the primary way by which the word transforms us.

[4] Finally, *lectio divina* concludes with contemplation (*contemplatio*), during which we take up, as a gift from God, his own way of seeing and judging reality, and ask ourselves *what conversion of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of us?*

In the *Letter to the Romans*, Saint Paul tells us: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect” (12:2). Contemplation aims at creating within us a truly wise and discerning vision of reality, as God sees it, and at forming within us “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16). The word of God appears here as a criterion for discernment: it is “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

[5] We do well also to remember that the process of *lectio divina* is not concluded until it arrives at action (*actio*), which moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity.

We find the supreme synthesis and fulfilment of this process in the Mother of God. For every member of the faithful Mary is the model of docile acceptance of God’s word, for she “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19; cf. 2:51); she discovered the profound bond which unites, in God’s great plan, apparently disparate events, actions and things.²⁹⁷(*Ibid.*)

I would also like to echo what the Synod proposed about the importance of the personal reading of Scripture, also as a practice allowing for the possibility, in accordance with the Church’s usual conditions, of gaining an indulgence either for oneself or for the faithful departed.²⁹⁸ The practice of indulgences²⁹⁹ implies the doctrine of the infinite merits of Christ – which the Church, as the minister of the redemption, dispenses and applies, but it also implies that of the communion of saints, and it teaches us that “to whatever degree we are united in Christ, we are united to one another, and the supernatural life of each one can be useful for the others”.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁸ “*Plenaria indulgentia* conceditur christifi deli qui Sacram Scripturam, iuxta textum a competenti auctoritate adprobatum, cum veneratione divino eloquio debita et ad modum lectionis spiritalis, per dimidiam saltem horam legerit; si per minus tem-

²⁹⁹ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1471-1479.)

³⁰⁰ Paul VI, Apostolic Constitution *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* (1 January 1967): AAS 59 (1967), 18-19.)

From this standpoint, the reading of the word of God sustains us on our journey of penance and conversion, enables us to deepen our sense of belonging to the Church, and helps us to grow in familiarity with God. As Saint Ambrose puts it, “When we take up the sacred Scriptures in faith and read them with the Church, we walk once more with God in the Garden”.³⁰¹(Cf. *Epistula* 49, 3: PL 16, 1204A.)

LECTIO DIVINA III. MODERN EUROPE and AMERICA (Luke Dysinger, OSB)

Encyclopedia of the Bible and Its Reception (© Walter de Gruyter, Berlin/Boston 2017)

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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