# Lectio Divina

The modern practice of *lectio divina* ("sacred reading") reflects the comparatively-recent renaissance of an ancient tradition. At its most basic level *lectio divina* is the slow, meditative reading of a sacred text, liberally interspersed with prayer. The exercise is less concerned with mastery of biblical texts than with the experience of prayer. In the Christian monastic tradition it is believed that gentle prayerful repetition of a biblical text permits the Word of God to lead the practitioner into contemplation, understood as an experience of nearness to or union with God.

Prayerful meditation on sacred scripture (*hagah*, *melete*, *meditatio*) is attested throughout the Old Testament, especially in the wisdom literature, (Jos 1.8; Pss 1.2; 77.12; Sir 6.37). Philo of Alexandria described this practice among first century Jews in Alexandria and Palestine and associated it with allegorical exegesis (*Contempl. Life* 13-31, 75-80; *Every Good Man is Free* 80-85). The third-century bishop Cyprian of Carthage summarized the Christian appropriation of this Jewish practice in a single sentence: "Be constant as well in prayer as in reading: now speak with God, now let God [speak] with you." (*Let. to Donatus* 1.15). In the fourth century Ambrose of Milan reworked this phrase into a proverb that later recurred throughout the spiritual literature of the Christian West: "We speak to Him when we pray; we listen to Him when we read the sacred oracles of God" (*De Off.* I.20,88).

In the early fifth century the monk John Cassian associated *lectio divina* with exegetical methods he adapted from Clement of Alexandria and Origen. In his fourteenth *Conference*, destined to became a staple of Latin monastic pedagogy, Cassian depicted the fruit of *lectio divina* as the ability to apprehend multiple hidden levels within the sacred text. The most basic level is the literal or historical sense. Beneath it lies the more mystical "allegorical", symbolic or Christological, sense. Third is the tropological (moral/ethical) level; and last is the anagogical or eschatological sense. The sixth-century monastic legislator Benedict of Nursia recommended that Cassian's conferences be read daily and that *lectio divina* be practiced twice each day by the monks who followed his rule. In the ninth century this rule was made normative for the whole of western monasticism.

Two twelfth-century authors, Hugh of St. Victor and Guigo II, offer glimpses of the medieval practice of *lectio divina*. Guigo's description (*The Ladder of Monks*) became the classic formula. He begins with reading (*lectio)* followed by meditation (*meditatio*), which in turn leads to prayer (*oratio*) and if all goes well, to contemplation (*contemplatio*). Although less well known, Hugh's description (*Didascalicon* V.9) had appeared several decades earlier (c.1138) and probably provided the pattern for Guigo's more poetic portrayal. As a canon Hugh was more concerned with pastoral and educational duties than Guigo, Prior of the Grande Chartreuse. Hugh therefore insisted that between meditation and contemplation should come "activity" (*operatio*), by which he probably meant both intellectual study and pastoral service.

French scholars Jean Leclercq (*Love of Learning*) and Henri DeLubac (*Medieval Exegesis*) have shown how the monastic practice of *lectio divina* together with Cassian's fourfold method of exegesis provided the basis for a monastic literary culture that flowered in the biblical commentaries of such authors as Gregory the Great, Bede, John of Ford, and Bernard of Clairvaux. This monastic culture, formed by the practice of *lectio divina,* regarded contemplation as the goal of scripture-study. In contrast, scholastic culture, typified by the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard and the summae of

Thomas Aquinas, interpreted *meditatio* as a prelude to *disputatio* and the uncovering of truth through dialectic argument.

The sixteenth through the twentieth centuries witnessed the eclipse of *lectio divina* and its gradual replacement in monastic timetables by structured techniques of meditation recommended by such leaders of the Counter-Reformation as Ignatius Loyola, Peter of Alcantara, and Francis de Sales. Their methods of "spiritual reading" or "spiritual exercise" were less flexible than the more freewheeling *lectio divina* of old, and the subject matter was not confined to sacred scripture. What had previously been an exercise in prayer facilitated by biblical texts now became a series of tightly-focused mental exercises intended to reinforce doctrinal orthodoxy or emphasize neglected virtue.

Beginning in the mid-twentieth century the aforementioned writings of DeLubac, Leclercq, and other advocates of *ressourcement* theology in Roman Catholicism drew attention to neglected theologies and practices from the early church. Their writings as well as 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 patrimony, particularly the interaction between scripture and prayer. Beginning in the nineteen-sixties the term *lectio divina* began to appear with increasing frequency in European monastic literature and by the nineteen-seventies and -eighties it became more widely used in the English-speaking world. In 2005 Pope Benedict XVI enthusiastically recommended *lectio divina* to the Christian faithful, prompting participants in the 2008 Synod of Catholic bishops to request a definition of the practice. A firm definition has proven elusive, however, as some authors use the term in its traditional sense as a form of contemplative prayer based in the reading of scripture, while others describe as *lectio divina* any private or group bible-study that includes some element of prayer.

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