

# The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina

## 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. 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.

### I. 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 (1 Kings 19:12), the “faint murmuring sound” which is God’s word for us, God’s voice touching our hearts. This gentle listening “tunes our ear” 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!” “Shema 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 that 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.

### II. Meditatio – meditation

Once we have found a word or a passage in the Scriptures that speaks to us in a personal way, we must take it in and “ruminate” on it. The image of a cow 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.

### **III. Oratio – prayer**

The third step in lectio divina is oratio – prayer. Here prayer is 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.

### **IV. 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.