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Chapter One

Return to *Lectio Divina:* A New Moment for the Church

The term *lectio divina* is used frequently to refer to various methods of prayerfully reading the Bible. *Lectio divina* is a Latin expression that is best translated, though incompletely, as "sacred reading." It has a rich and varied history within the Christian tradition and is becoming increasingly popular in our day while revitalizing the lives of many throughout the church.

As a way of praying, lectio divina honors that most basic source of all real prayer—an interior desire for God. Lectio divina lets us understand that our desire for God is the result of God's initiative, the stirring of God's grace within us, drawing us and inviting us to a deeper intimacy with him.

Unfortunately, most people think of prayer as an encounter with God that they are expected to begin. As if starting a conversation, they approach God with their needs, then wait for him to reply. When using this approach to prayer, they don't understand why God is so reluctant to respond to their prayerful initiatives. They become disillusioned and frustrated with the whole idea of prayer as talking to God and waiting for an answer.

By beginning with the revealed word of God, lectio divina continues the conversation that God has begun. We first pay attention to his approach to us and focus on our receptivity. Scripture

becomes a means for God to feed, heal, and love us. We open ourselves to God's presence and respond with our hearts.

Resurging Interest in the Bible

The renewed attraction to lectio divina today is a rich fruit of the increasing interest in the Bible among the people of God worldwide. Though the Bible has always been at the heart of Christian faith and practice, there was a time between the Reformation and the Second Vatican Council in which a deep fear of the influence of personal opinion on Scripture interpretation effectively removed the Bible from the hands of most Catholics.

During this period, the rich biblical theology and spirituality that characterized the church's early centuries remained dormant. Though church doctrine, liturgy, and practice, as well as liturgical art and architecture, taught people the images and ideas of the Bible, a family Bible in a Catholic home was only an item of pious décor before the revolutionary changes brought about by the council.

In words that are now enshrined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (133), the Second Vatican Council urged "all the Christian faithful" to make Bible reading a regular part of their lives. It also quoted the famous words of St. Jerome (fourth century) that not knowing Scripture means not knowing Christ[1]:

> The sacred synod forcefully and specifically exhorts all the Christian faithful . . . to learn "the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ" by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures. "Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ." (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 25)

The council also urged the church to make every means available for God's people to read, study, and pray the Scriptures. It insisted that "access to sacred Scripture ought to be open wide to the Christian faithful" (*Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation*, 22). This has resulted in more Bible-rich preaching and catechesis, as well as a surge of Bible studies, conferences, workshops, and publications throughout the world.

The Highest Goal of Bible Reading

There are many reasons for reading and studying the Bible. They range from religious curiosity, to academic interest, to a desire to evangelize others or to respond to fundamentalist attacks.

Many Christians read the Bible with an intellectual mind-set. They want to gain a comprehensive overview of the history of our salvation, as well as a taste for all the great literature that fills the many pages of Scripture. Those with a scholarly bent study the Bible in order to understand the ideas and themes raised by the text. Others are more interested in the theological issues woven throughout Scripture. They want to be able to teach, discuss, and debate the great truths of faith that are enshrined within its sacred pages.

There is one reason for reading the Bible, however, that is supreme: we read Scripture in order to encounter God there. We know in faith that the Bible is inspired by God's Spirit and communicates the word of God to us. Through the sacred pages of Scripture, we can experience the living word of God speaking to us and sharing divine life with us. Reading the Bible invites us to experience God's own self-manifestation and to respond to God with personal faith.

This highest goal of Bible reading is also the purpose of lectio divina. It is a traditional way of reading Scripture that allows the word of God to penetrate our hearts and leads us to grow in an intimate relationship with him. In lectio divina we trust that the sacred text will not only *inform* us but *transform* us, as well.

The Ancient Tradition of *Lectio Divina*

In Christianity's earliest centuries, it was understood that a daily reading of Scripture nourished the Christian life. The church inherited this belief from the Jewish tradition at the roots of Christianity. Jewish teachers who lived before the Christian era instructed their disciples to immerse themselves in prayerful reading of the sacred scrolls. They taught that the Torah is God's presence, to which we open ourselves through reading, meditation, and prayer.

In the Jewish synagogue, the ark containing the sacred texts is the focal point for worship. With lamps burning around it, this sacred space proclaims the holy presence. Truly this is where God encounters his people and speaks with them. Christians share with our elder brothers and sisters in Judaism the tremendous privilege of being sons and daughters of the holy book.

As a Jewish teacher, Jesus was absorbed in sacred reading of the Hebrew Scriptures. We see in his reading of the scroll in the synagogue at Nazareth that he had prayerfully reflected often on that text of the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:16-30). From the time of his ministry in Galilee until his passion in Jerusalem, Jesus' contemplative reading of the ancient Scriptures matured his self-understanding. This method of prayerful meditation is the type of sacred reading he taught his disciples.

This ancient art of lectio divina was encouraged in the patristic theology of the early Christian centuries. Origen (third century) expressed the principles of lectio divina, affirming that in order to read the Bible profitably it is necessary to do so with attention, constancy, and prayer. The term itself is found extensively in the writings of fourth- and fifth-century patristic authors, such as St. Jerome (fourth century): "The soul is fed each day with *lectio divina*."[2]

The desert fathers and mothers of the early centuries and the monastic movement nurtured lectio divina. St. Benedict (sixth century) incorporated it into his monastic rule, setting aside considerable time for lectio divina in the daily schedule, so that the triple base of monastic life consisted of liturgy, manual labor, and sacred reading. Louis Bouyer, OC, describes the qualities of lectio divina as practiced by the monks:

> It is personal reading of the Word of God during which we try to assimilate its substance; a reading in faith, in a spirit of prayer, believing in the real presence of God who speaks to us in the sacred text, while the monk himself strives to be present in a spirit of obedience and total surrender to the divine promises and demands.[3]

Unfortunately, this unified and personal way of prayerful reading declined in later centuries under the influence of Scholasticism (twelfth century on). This analytical and intellectual approach to Scripture became increasingly suspicious of personal experience and the contemplative dimensions of prayer. Finally, lectio divina went into virtual oblivion after the Ref-

ormation (sixteenth century) because of the strong Catholic reaction to Protestant emphasis on the personal interpretation of Scripture. With the need to control a threat that seemed out of hand, the church's prayer moved into the head and left the heart behind.

Sacred Reading for All God's People

The dominant attitude toward the Scriptures that had prevailed for several centuries within the church, from the Reformation to the Second Vatican Council, assumed that the purpose of the text was to communicate a doctrinal or moral message. When we had received the message, the text had achieved its purpose. With this attitude there was really no purpose in reading Scripture for its own sake, but only as a means to extract some specific teaching of the church.

Lectio divina helps us return to the more ancient understanding of the sacredness of the inspired text. The Bible is not like a textbook, providing objective information. Rather, it is a means of joining us to the story of God's people. It appeals to our imagination and feelings. We get caught up in the literature and experience it as God personally addressing us. In practicing lectio divina, we love the text itself; we read it reflectively, linger over it, and let it reach the depths of our hearts.

Sacred reading is again becoming a source of deep spiritual growth for all of God's people. We are returning to the tradition taught to us by the Jewish rabbis and by the example of Jesus himself. We are reaping the wisdom of the desert and the understanding cultivated for centuries through the monastic tradition. Once again, the whole people of God are recogniz-

ing the spiritual power achieved through experiencing God's presence in the inspired Scriptures. Reverential reading and listening to God's voice in the sacred text can offer a vital experience of God's living word.

Pope Benedict XVI has encouraged the faithful to restore the practice of lectio divina. At a conference entitled "Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church," he said,

> I would like in particular to recall and recommend the ancient tradition of *lectio divina*: the diligent reading of sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to him with trusting openness of heart. If the practice of *lectio divina* is effectively promoted, I am convinced that it will bring to the church a new spiritual springtime.[4]

Clearly, Benedict sees great value in working to revive this ancient practice. Lectio divina is not just encouraged for certain people in the church—clerics or religious—but for all the people of God. If we return to the earlier understanding that the Christian life is one that is regularly nourished by sacred Scripture, a new spiritual renewal will emerge to bring forth abundant fruit for the church.

Lectio divina today cannot simply duplicate the practice of the early centuries. Most of God's people no longer live in the desert or monastic communities. The prescriptions enshrined in patristic texts and communal rules can offer us guidance, but not rigid formulas, for reviving the practice of sacred reading. Factors such as

the following require us to modify our approach to lectio divina: today we must take into account the awareness that people are seeking solitude in the midst of secular life; that couples want to create Christian families nourished by Scripture; that we must authenticate our understanding of biblical literature by examining the valuable scholarship of recent decades; and that believers want to experience a community of faith in the context of their lived experiences.

In light of contemporary challenges to the spiritual life, Benedict has urged pastors, scholars, and writers to ponder new methods for adapting lectio divina to the present age. In his conference address, the pope stated, "The ancient tradition of *lectio divina* should be encouraged through the use of new methods, attentively pondered, adapted to the time."[5]

Because lectio divina should be promoted for all people, a variety of approaches can be imagined that remain faithful to the ancient tradition. In order to bring the richness of sacred reading to the people of God, we will need to be wise, like the master of the household in the gospel "who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old" (Matthew 13:52).

Essential Characteristics of *Lectio Divina*

Because lectio divina must use new methods, adapted to the times, in order to become a vital spiritual devotion for the modern church, it is essential to understand what makes for its authentic practice. With this understanding, we will be able to discern sacred reading that is in line with the ancient tradition as well as practices that deviate from the vital wisdom we have inherited from the past. The following qualities are the essential

characteristics that make the common practice of Bible reading an authentic experience of lectio divina:

- *Lectio divina establishes a dialogue between the reader of Scripture and God.* The prayerful reader experiences the reading and reflection on the text as a listening to God. Having listened carefully to God, the reader then responds to him in prayer. St. Jerome (fourth century) explains: "He listens to God when he reads sacred Scripture; he speaks with him when he prays to the Lord."[6] This gentle oscillation between listening to God and responding in prayer is an essential aspect of lectio divina.

- *Lectio divina is a personal encounter with God through Scripture.* The biblical text is not a book of information. Its purpose is not to communicate a doctrinal or moral message. Rather, the text itself is a gateway to God. Through the inspired Scripture, we meet the God who loves us and desires our response. This encounter with God is a communion that has many of the same personal characteristics as the communion of the Eucharist. The living word is a divine presence; God dwells within the inspired word.

- *Lectio divina aims at heart-to-heart intimacy with God.* In the Bible, the heart is a person's innermost core, the place from which one's deepest longings, motivations, decisions, memories, and desires arise. In lectio divina,

the prayerful reader attempts to respond to God's word with the whole heart. St. Gregory the Great urged the reader of Scripture, "Learn to know the heart of God in the words of God" (sixth century).[7] Through lectio divina we can come to a relationship with God at the deepest level of intimacy.

- *Lectio divina leads to contemplation and action.* There is a moment in all true love that leads to a level of communication too deep for words. Prayerful reading inevitably leads to that deepest form of communication with God, which is loving silence. In addition, all true love must be expressed in action. Eventually words become inadequate, and love must be demonstrated in deeds arising from a changed heart. Lectio divina is recognized as genuine through its fruit; it produces contemplatives in action.

Necessary Dispositions for Lectio Divina

The encounter of the two disciples with the risen Lord on the road to Emmaus is an experience of lectio divina. As they were walking on their way from Jerusalem, the disciples were in a mood of dismay and discouragement—not good dispositions for lectio divina. But at Christ's initiative, they found a way to open up their lives to listen to him and to experience his risen presence with them. In reflecting on their encounter, "They said to each other, 'Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?'" (Luke 24:32).

The word of God and its power to transform us are gifts from God that we must accept into our lives. In order to receive the gift of deep intimacy with Christ, we must create the necessary conditions within us so that we can more readily listen and receive. Here are some of the necessary dispositions for lectio divina to do its work of conversion within us:

- *Openheartedness.* We can accept the word of God when we open our hearts to the gifts it offers us. There is much within Scripture that may confuse, frustrate, and even shock us and might even cause us to reject its message. On the other hand, we also have a tendency within us to say, "I know this already; I've heard this before." The only way to receive the word of God through the text is to approach it with an open mind and heart. If we do so, God gradually opens the doors of our hearts and creates within us the freedom to be completely dedicated to his love. On our part, this means ridding ourselves of as many external attractions and internal passions as possible. This purgation creates purity of heart and that full receptivity that enables us to be progressively changed by God's word.

- *Reverence.* In prayerfully reading Scripture, we are entering the mystery of God. This sense of awe before God leads us toward silence and opens us to listen. Lectio divina places us in the position of a disciple being instructed by the Lord. The teacher is the one who speaks, while the disciple remains silent to listen. God's word is always

more than we can comprehend, and we should never approach it with less than veneration and respect. Reverence before the mystery of God's word instills humility within us. St. Augustine describes his initial arrogance before God: "Proud as I was, I dared to seek that which only the humble can find."[8] We must accept our profound ignorance with regard to God. Filled with hunger and thirst, yearning and need, we know that we can only listen and receive. When we reverently open the sacred text, we open our hearts to be formed by God.

- *Faithfulness.* The regular practice of lectio divina gradually creates a "biblical" person, whose mind and heart are saturated with the words, images, and memories of Scripture. But this process takes time, dedication, and persistence. Spasmodic bursts of devotion will not work. The more we understand and get to know God through our prayerful reading, the more we grow in love. Faithfulness to this communication with our divine Lover creates an ever-deepening intimacy with him. We come to know ourselves better, too, as we begin to see ourselves through the eyes of God. Gradually, lectio divina becomes a contemplative experience of love.

- *Expectation.* For the effective reception of lectio divina, we must trust that God is present and speaks to us through the inspired word. This type of personal trust in a God who cares about us deeply engenders expectation in the prayerful reader. If we believe that God is pres-

> ent in the word, we can be convinced that he is going to touch our lives. We expect that God will give us what he wants us to receive, working profoundly within our hearts and changing us at a deep level. God offers his word for a purpose, and his purpose will be effective to the degree that we anticipate being transformed by our loving God.

The word of God has the potential within it to nourish and transform us, just as healthful food contains everything needed to satisfy our bodily hungers and promote our vigorous development. But we must create the conditions for Scripture to do its work within us. When we cultivate these dispositions within ourselves, we allow the saving power within God's word to renovate our lives. Listen to the words of St. Bernard of Clairvaux (twelfth century), a Cistercian abbot and Father of the Church:

> I store up the word of God as you would food. The word of God is a living bread, the food of the soul. Bread kept in a cupboard can be stolen, eaten by rats, go stale, but once it is eaten none of these misfortunes are to be feared. Store up the word of God like that, because blessed are those that keep it. Let it sink into your inmost heart and pass into your affections and way of life. Eat plentifully of it and your soul will rejoice. Never forget to eat this bread, lest your heart wither, but feed and strengthen it with so rich and fruitful a food. If you hold on to the Word, the Word will protect you. The Son of God will come to you and his Father also.[9]

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. The author says that the source of all genuine prayer is an interior desire for God. What is the origin of this desire? How do you experience this interior desire?

2. In what ways has the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, that "access to sacred Scripture ought to be widely available to the Christian faithful," been implemented in the last few decades?

3. What are some good reasons for reading the Bible? What is the best reason for biblical reading?

4. Why is it said that lectio divina has its roots in the Jewish tradition? What are the highlights of the growth of lectio divina in Christian history?

5. What characteristics of lectio divina seem most important to you?

6. Which of the necessary dispositions for lectio divina do you want to concentrate on in the immediate future?

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