

## LECTIO DIVINA AND FOUR CLASSIC PRAYER PATHS

IF PRAYER IS SO MUCH MORE THAN we normally think, and if the ways we can open ourselves in prayer are so much more diverse than we normally practice, perhaps a map of the possibilities would be helpful. Thankfully, the ancient Christian monastic prayer practice of *lectio divina* gives us just such a map.

### PRAYING THE WORD

*Lectio divina*—literally meaning “divine reading” but better translated as “spiritual reading”—is a way of prayerfully engaging with Scriptures in order to hear God’s personal word to you. It comes to us from the earliest days of the church, with roots in Judaism. Jews have always had two approaches to the Torah. The first is analytical and seeks to discover the one objective, true meaning of the text. The second is more subjective in that it seeks the deeper and more personal spiritual meaning. Both, of course, have validity and importance, but it was the second that provided the soil out of which early Christians developed *lectio divina*. In the third century, Origen used the

a number of years ago, I eventually gave up private reading of Scriptures because my ways of reading them were simply not serving as a means of grace. Giving up personal Bible reading didn't answer my longing to meet God more deeply, but it did relieve the frustration of willfully hanging on to a spiritual practice that no longer was bringing life.

I first encountered *lectio divina* in a book by Basil Pennington.<sup>②</sup> He described it as his most basic and important spiritual practice. I was intrigued because it was clear that, far from a discipline, this way of engaging with Scriptures brought him life. Here and elsewhere he spoke of waking in the morning expectant about and eager to receive the word that God had for him for that day. The Eucharist and *lectio* were, he said, the two places where he was most deeply touched by God. Together with centering prayer, to which I was also first introduced in this initial encounter with him and Cistercian spirituality, these formed the framework of his day as a monk, creating successive periods of prayerful stillness, openness and receiving of the in-flowing life of Christ. I wanted what he had. I knew I needed to find a life-giving way of again learning to open myself to Scriptures and through them to encounter God. And I knew that my life desperately needed the stillness that would allow this encounter to be more transformational.

Over the years this simple practice has profoundly rejuvenated both my reading of Scripture and my experience of God in prayer. It is not the only way I read the Bible, nor is it the only way I pray. But it has made Scriptures fresh and personal once again, and has helped me meet God in a way that is immediate and vital. In short, it has brought me back in contact with the Word, not simply with the Bible.

#### FOUR MOVEMENTS, FOUR PRAYER PATHS

If we look at this prayer process more carefully we can, however, see that *lectio divina* involves four components, or—as I prefer to call them—four movements. Rather than being a linear process that must be mechanically followed, they describe four dimensions of the rich and dynamic dance that is *lectio divina*. Let me initially describe them separately in their usual sequence, and then we will return to the more fluid way this dance with God actually unfolds.

As usually practiced, *lectio divina* involves reading and listening to a short passage of Scripture several times with ample opportunity for contemplative stillness between and within each reading. In the classical form of the method associated with Benedictine spirituality, the passage would be read four times with a slightly different focus for each reading. If I were guiding you through the process, I might say something like the following:

Prepare now to hear God's Word to you. In this first reading, listen for the general sense of what is being communicated. Open your entire self to this process. Attend to the words you hear, but listen particularly for the word or phrase that stands out for you. Also notice any images that might form within you, or memories, sensations or experiences that might arise in your consciousness as you listen. Sit in stillness after hearing the words and allow the Word of God to form within you as you open yourself in attentiveness and expectancy to what God has for you.

After the first reading and a suitable period of silence, I might then precede the second reading with these words:

What is God saying to you

- 2 Listen now to the same passage read a second time. This time allow yourself to ponder what you are hearing in both your head and your heart. Notice the thoughts that arise in response to the Word, and notice the movements in your heart.

Following the same pattern, I might then precede the third reading by saying:

- 3 Listen now to the passage a third time. This time allow yourself to respond to what has touched your mind and heart. This response may be worded or unworded, but it is prayer if it is offered with faith and openness to God.

Finally, after another period of silence, I might then say:

- 4 Listen to a final reading and allow yourself to simply be with God in stillness. Rest in God and be with the God who has spoken to you through the Word.

There is nothing magical about this wording, nor is there anything fixed in the way the passage should be listened to in multiple readings. However, what I just offered draws on a framework for prayer that was first outlined by the twelfth-century Carthusian monk Guigo II. He identified four stages of monastic prayer and labeled them as *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio* and *contemplatio*. He taught that prayer is a journey from the biblical text (*lectio*) to inquiry (*meditatio*) to response (*oratio*) and finally to the gift of God's presence (*contemplatio*). Guigo II interpreted these steps in quite a linear manner. In fact, the image he offered was of a ladder with four rungs. Disregarding this hierarchical organization for the moment, I suggest that what these four Latin terms describe is four broad prayer paths—prayer as attending, prayer as pondering, prayer as responding and prayer as being.

<i>Lectio</i>	Prayer as attending	reading meditating speaking
<i>Meditatio</i>	Prayer as pondering	
<i>Oratio</i>	Prayer as responding	
<i>Contemplatio</i>	Prayer as being	

Four movements of *lectio divina*

1) *Lectio* is prayer as attending. This should be the foundation of all prayer. Literally meaning “reading,” *lectio* reminds us that prayer should begin as attentive openness and expectancy. In *lectio* we listen and wait for the still, small voice of God that will speak to us personally and intimately. We seek to hear a word or phrase that is God’s word for us for this day. In faith we wait for God to speak through Word and Spirit to our spirit.

2) *Meditatio*, from which we get the English word *meditation*, is prayer as pondering. Now we reflectively chew on what we have received from God in *lectio*. While *lectio* involves the senses and intuition, *meditatio* is primarily a cognitive (head) and affective (heart) activity. “Cognitive” means it involves thinking. But thinking that is spiritually productive can never be restricted to rational, analytical thoughts. It is more like pondering or reflecting. Consider Mary, who after the remarkable visitation of the angel of God and the communication of unimaginably breathtaking news of the child she was to bear is said to have pondered all these things in her heart (Luke 2:51). *Meditatio* can never be simply an activity of the mind. It must also engage the heart. The pondering of *meditatio* combines head and heart.

feel

3) Literally meaning “speaking,” *oratio* is prayer as responding. After pondering God’s word to us, our hearts are touched and our wills are stirred. *Oratio* is our response to this stirring of our spirit.

There are many forms that such response can take. It may be a worded response—what we often think of as prayer. But we may also prostrate ourselves in worship, light a candle, stand or sit in silence that makes space for gratitude, write our own psalm, paint a picture, sing, go for a walk, or many other things. What joy it is to learn to not only pray with words but also with our hands, feet and hearts! The word that we have received has now begun to touch our deepest self, and we respond from those depths.

4) *Contemplatio* is prayer as being. As you will have guessed, we get our English word *contemplation* from this Latin root. In *contemplatio* we rest in the presence of the One whose word and presence have invited us to a transforming embrace. Having touched both our minds and our hearts, the Word now leads us into quiet rest in the Beloved. This is a prayer of presence. It is prayer as being—a gift of being in and with God that allows our subsequent and very important doing to flow from this quite still center. It is the movement from conversation to communion.

Most broadly understood, *lectio divina* involves receiving God's revelation wherever it occurs. This means that there are other media beyond Scriptures that can also be engaged with in this same prayerful way. We can, for example, apply it to the reading of a book or article. In fact, it is very appropriately used when reading something devotional—say, for example, the book you now hold in your hands. But we can also open our senses and attend to God's revelation while listening to music, viewing a work of art, contemplating an icon, talking to a friend, listening to a sermon or watching a sunset. As Paul reminded the Christians in Rome, for the mind that is open and prepared to see, God is always there to be seen (Romans 1:19-20). God's revelation is particularly clear in that part of creation that most directly reflects the divine image and likeness—the graced

person.<sup>3</sup> In our very selves, and in others, we can experience the loving presence of God and hear God's word to us. *Lectio divina* is not restricted, therefore, to reading a book. However, the most privileged hearing of the word of God will always be when we sit in prayerful stillness before Scriptures, particularly when we do so within Christian community.

### HOLISTIC PRAYER

You will recall that Guigo II saw *lectio divina* as four stages of prayer. He pictured these stages as four rungs of a ladder by which we ascend to God. Unfortunately, this imagery fits all too well with the spirituality of ascent that we seem to want—a spirituality of progressive approximations to some spiritual goal we think will be attainable if we play by the rules. However, regardless of how it is often misinterpreted in this way, Christian spirituality moves in exactly the opposite direction. Christian spirituality is a spirituality of descent. It invites us to follow Jesus on a path of self-emptying surrender. The way of Christ is always the way of the cross. Good Friday always precedes Easter Sunday.

But the consequences for the understanding and practice of prayer of this sort of ladder of prayer forms are equally dangerous. It turns a rich dynamic prayer practice into something mechanical and linear. Organizing the four components hierarchically also implies that they have an order of importance. This has been part of the reason why contemplative prayer is often mistakenly assumed to be a "higher" form of prayer—suitable only for the spiritual elites who have mastered the lower levels of prayer. This is a serious misunderstanding. All four movements of prayer are equally important and are gifts of God for all Christians. None are limited to people of a specific gender,

open heart to listen  
allow spirit to lead

age, personality or stage of the spiritual journey.

People sometimes say to me that contemplative prayer is not for them because they are too extroverted, or that pondering prayer is not for them as they are not sufficiently intellectual or reflective. Some tell me that prayer that engages the heart is not for them because they are not particularly emotional. But once again these judgments are based on misunderstanding. Because each of these ways of engaging in prayer corresponds to a way of engaging with life, one will always be more natural than the others for each of us. However, all of us will benefit from learning to open each of these portals of our self to God in prayer. By doing so, God begins to take the underdeveloped parts of self and weave them together into our true self that is being formed in Christ.

Taken together, these four movements give us a picture of holistic prayer. Opening the self to God in its totality involves meeting God in mind and heart, the senses and imagination, stillness and action, meditation and contemplation. Holistic prayer involves all of our being. In prayer we bring our total self to God, and in prayer that total self becomes increasingly a whole self.

Rather than thinking of these four components as stages, I would suggest that you think of them as movements of the dance of prayer. This dance does not have to follow a preset order. Allow the Spirit to lead this dance, and allow it to unfold spontaneously. Sometimes it will include only one or two of the movements, and sometimes all of them. Don't worry, therefore, about the sequence of what happens once you step onto the dance floor, and don't try to control the process. Just open your heart to God and allow the Spirit to lead this dance of love in the way that is God's gift to you for the present moment.



## SILENCE AND THE WORD

If we look more carefully we can see that this dance is even simpler than I have suggested. Its four movements can be distilled down to two primary ones—silence and the Word.

Both silence and the Word belong to the core of prayer. God's Word draws us into silence. It cuts through our words to the silent center of our heart. But severed from what Cynthia Bourgeault calls the "nurturing ground of contemplative silence," our engagement with the Word tends to become analytical and loses its transformational power.<sup>4</sup> Silence quiets our spirit and deepens our awareness of God and ourselves. But in the absence of the Word, silence becomes an empty void—a place of presence to self that is not anchored in presence to God.

The Word and silence belong together. Their rhythm is as simple and basic as breathing. We draw in. We let go in response. Then, spontaneously, we open ourselves and draw in once again. And just as naturally we then respond with release. It should be the same with the rhythm of these two core movements of prayer. First we open ourselves in faith and draw in God's Word, and then we rest in silence, allowing that Word to become life to us. We breathe God in, we breathe God back out into the world and into our daily life. All Christians need both movements. No one can specialize in either the Word or silence—ignoring the other—without consequences to the health of spirit and soul. To do so is like trying to only breathe in or only breathe out. Each leads to the other—at least if you want to stay alive!

Where should you start? I recommend starting with the Word. Open yourself in faith and take in the gifts and invitations you receive from God through the Word. Let the Word wash over you, just as water flows over you when you stand in a warm shower. Ponder it—with heart and mind. Allow

yourself to respond to it. But then be sure to leave sufficient space in silence for the being that grows out of what you receive.

Dare to believe that God still communicates and that Scriptures can become God's living Word for you. Then, with prayerful expectancy, savor the words of a short passage of Scripture, seeking God's presence and personal word to you. Take the word or phrase that you receive as a gift of spiritual manna—daily bread from the Bread of life. Sometimes you will return to the text several times, either to further reflect on the word that God has given you or to seek some new gift. At other times, a single word or phrase will quickly come to you, giving you something to ponder, respond to and be with for the rest of the day. Don't be distracted by evaluation or comparison. Remember, the nature of your prayer experience is up to God. So, get your nose out of God's business! Simply content yourself with being in the presence of God by praying the Scriptures. This is the prayer of *lectio divina*.

#### MAKING IT PRACTICAL

*Lectio divina* has the potential to be such a dynamic and vitalizing force of God in our lives that I want to be very sure that I don't leave it in an overly conceptual place. What it offers us is a tremendously powerful yet very simple means of being with God in stillness before the Word, something that can and should become a part of the prayer life of every Christian. Therefore, let me draw together some practical things that you can do if you feel invited to make this prayer part of your own practice.

1. *Place.* Pick a place that you will use for regular times of *lectio divina*. Make this somewhere quiet that will support attentive openness to God. Consider having a candle available that you might light as a way of inviting the Light of the world to be present as you start. A crucifix or icon might also be helpful, although do not use them if they would put you in serious tension with your own spiritual tradition. If employed, these sorts of aids to prayer do not make the place sacred. Your intent does that—namely, your intention of being open to God in a prayer of stillness and presence before the Word of God. But they can facilitate your awareness of God's presence, and it is in this way that they serve as prayer supports.

2. *Time.* Be realistic as you think about when and for how long you will try to practice this prayer, but also plan on being regular. It may be that daily will work for you. However, do not feel that you need to start with this. Many people try to take this time of prayer three or four times a week. Remember, pray as you can, not as you ought. Similarly, be realistic about how long a period of time you might set aside for *lectio divina*. This may not be the only time you pray or the only way you pray. But do set a realistic amount of time that you will strive to make available for meeting God in silence and the Word. It could be as short as five minutes. Longer is better (ten to fifteen minutes might be ideal), but not always possible. Make it as frequent as you are realistically able and for an amount of time that won't leave you

feeling rushed. Remember, you are responding to an invitation to communion with your Beloved. Don't turn it into a heroic activity.

3. *A short reading.* Recalling that this prayer need not involve sitting with a book, let me nonetheless suggest that you begin by grounding your practice of *lectio divina* in reading, and that you make the reading of a short passage of Scripture a regular part of this. Theoretically, any portion of Scripture could be suitable, but most people find that this way of praying the Word works best when you engage with a short psalm (or a few verses of a longer one) or a short passage from one of the Gospels. The Epistles also work very well. If you do not have a framework for daily readings, you might utilize one of the available print or online lectionaries that list daily readings.<sup>5</sup> Whatever you read, the important thing is to read it slowly and contemplatively, several times. Remember, this is not reading for content. It is contemplative listening with openness of mind and heart, the senses and the imagination. Don't attempt to cover some set amount of biblical text—making this, for example, part of a project for reading through the whole Bible. Rather, just take a small morsel of Scripture and expect God to give you a word or phrase from it that will nourish your soul and meet your present spiritual needs.

4. *Listen for a word from God.* In this context, a "word" does not necessarily mean a single word; it could be a

phrase or even a short sentence. It means a meaningful message summed up in a few words. Notice the gentle touch that draws your attention, makes you stop and think, or stimulates a memory or a body sensation. Trust that this is God's word for you.

Margaret Silf compares the listening process in *lectio divina* to the tasting process in exploring a box of chocolates. Just as in sampling chocolates we try one and then another, returning when we have found the one that is most satisfying, so too in *lectio divina* "we read, or listen to, a passage of Scripture and try each word, each phrase, as it slowly passes before us. And when we find a phrase, a thought, an image, or a memory that moves us in some way, we hold onto it and let that become our prayer."<sup>6</sup> There is no need to try to analyze your reaction or to figure out why this particular word speaks to you. Just receive it as a gift.

Sometimes God may speak very directly. A word or phrase of the text may seem to virtually jump out at you. Other times nothing will be so dramatically obvious. And there will be days when God does not seem to speak at all. But just listen in openness and attentiveness. And if nothing in particular speaks to you in that special way, simply take a word or a phrase in faith and carry it with you for the day. It may be that it will speak to you more personally later, sometimes when you least expect it. Or it may be a word someone else needs. Regardless, when you have identified the word or phrase

that is for you, simply allow it to become a gateway to an encounter with the Lord. Ponder it in your mind and heart and take it with you for the day.

5. *Respond.* Thank God for the gift you have been given and for God's personal word to you. And then allow your heart and head to lead you in a response. This might take the form of a worded prayer, but need not. You may feel drawn to write something in your journal, make a painting, listen to or make music, or call a friend. Whatever your response, it is a way of expressing the word that you have taken in and on which you have been pondering. It is a way of releasing that word into your life. It is, therefore, prayer.

6. *Be with God in stillness.* Finally, as your worded prayer comes to an end, simply be with God in stillness. Sit in silence in God's presence. Soak in the goodness of God's grace. Allow yourself to be lost in prayer, lost in God. Rest in the presence of the living Word. Don't worry if nothing noteworthy happens. Like Juan—the workman who stopped for daily stillness and prayer in the inner-city church—simply spend some time with your Lord. This experience of wordless quiet enjoyment of God is contemplation. Receive it as a gift.

Notice that you are ending your prayer time as you began it—in silence. Take this contemplative stillness with you as you move out into your day. And remain ever watchful, because the God who met you in this

divine rendezvous will be watching for you and seeking more moments of loving encounter throughout the day. So stay attentive and open.

### GLANCING AHEAD

One way to organize the diversity of the hundreds of specific prayer techniques and practices that are part of the rich heritage of Christian spirituality is to consider them from the vantage point of the four movements of *lectio divina*. This will provide the framework for the next four chapters in which we will examine each of these four faces of holistic prayer in much more detail. What we discover is that while each prayer practice is grounded in either attending, pondering, responding or being, most of them move the pray-er from that base toward the other dimensions of holistic prayer. As I suggested earlier, there is no fixed pattern to the movement through these four faces of prayer, nor do all need to be present in any single prayer experience. However, God wants to include all of us in this transformational encounter that prayer involves. This means that we should not be surprised that while we can start anywhere on this prayer wheel, opening ourselves to God will always invite a response from the totality of our being. The dance with the divine can start on any of the four movements, but over time it will always lead us toward this holistic response.