



# Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Art and Practice of *Lectio Divina*

St. Augustine of Hippo’s phrase “ever ancient, ever new” describes the renewed interest in praying with Scripture that has re-emerged in today’s Church. Around the country, parish Bible study groups, small Christian communities, and other faith sharers have rediscovered a simple, insightful way to hear and experience the Word of God with one another through an ancient prayer form, *lectio divina*.

“The reading from the Word of God at each Hour . . . and readings from the Fathers and spiritual masters at certain Hours, reveal more deeply the meaning of the mystery being celebrated, assist in understanding the psalms, and prepare for silent prayer. The *lectio divina*, where the Word of God is so read and meditated that it becomes prayer, is thus rooted in the liturgical celebration.”

“Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ, as in *lectio divina* or the rosary. This form of prayerful reflection is of great value, but Christian prayer should go further: to the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with him.”

—*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., nos. 1177, 2708  
(Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana–United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000)

*Lectio divina* is a form of meditation rooted in liturgical celebration that dates back to early monastic communities. It was a method practiced by monks in their daily encounter with Scripture, both as they prepared for the Eucharist and as they prayed the Liturgy of the Hours. Its use

continued in the Middle Ages in religious orders, such as the Benedictines and Carmelites, that not only practiced *lectio divina* daily but passed this treasure from the past on to the next generations. The practice of *lectio divina* is resurfacing today as a wonderful way to meditate on God’s Word.

## What Does the Latin Name Mean?

The Latin phrase “*lectio divina*” may be translated as “divine reading.” *Lectio divina* is a method for praying with the Scriptures. As one reads and invites the Word to become a transforming lens that brings the events of daily living into focus, one can come to live more deeply and find the presence of God more readily in the events of each day. The method of *lectio divina* follows four steps: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *contemplatio* (contemplation), and *oratio* (prayer).

“*Lectio*,” or “reading,” is the first step in the prayer process. The early monks understood that the fruitfulness of a monk’s prayer depends upon the simplicity, reverence, and openness to the Spirit with which the “reader” approaches the Word of God. The goal of this reading is not to rush through several chapters of Scripture. The reader, rather than trying to take in large sections of Scripture, adopts a reflective stance towards a short Scripture passage, pausing on a single word or phrase that resonates with the mind and heart.

This “reading” leads to the second step, known as “*meditatio*”—Latin for “meditation”—which invites one to reflect upon what was read. Ancient monks explained this process as a deep, unhurried thinking about the Word one has read—a rumination, somewhat like the way a

cow chews the cud. As the Word is read in this step, the process of ruminating gradually draws the meditator's focus from concerns of the mind to concerns of the heart.

The Word moves a person more deeply with the third step, which the ancients called "*contemplatio*" or "contemplation." Contemplation is characterized by an openness of the heart, by which the reader experiences God as the One who prays within, who allows the person in contemplation to know the Word wordlessly and without image. By God's grace, *contemplatio* gives one a unique ability to connect one's newly discovered insights to daily life experiences, with the inspiration that comes from the Word of God and that has the gracious capacity to refresh the heart and mind.

The fourth and final step, "*oratio*," meaning "oration" or "prayer," invites one's personal response to God. This response is dialogical and can be understood as "a conversation between friends," as St. Teresa of Avila defined prayer. One takes the time to talk to God about what was read, heard, or experienced, or about the questions that have arisen in the depth of one's being. This response can become transformative when one accepts the promptings of the Word toward an embrace of all that life now holds. One can find God in the ups and downs of life, in times of joy and pain, as well as in ordinary, everyday moments.

## How Can *Lectio Divina* Enrich Parish Life?

In the Church today, *lectio divina* can provide a simple yet prayerful method for faith sharing among Christians at every stage of life. For example, Sr. Diane Simons, IHM, director of religious education (DRE) and pastoral associate of Annunciation Parish in Bellmawr, New Jersey, welcomes parishioners each Wednesday evening.

They spend an hour in prayer, concluding with a period of *lectio divina* based on one of the coming Sunday's readings. It is a sacred time for the parishioners, both communally and individu-

ally. As one participant remarked to Sr. Simons, "On Sunday the readings are already familiar to me. I hear the Word of God with my heart and find deeper meaning with Jesus in my life."

Sr. Rosemary Quigg, IHM, who ministers in St. Rose of Lima Parish in Miami, Florida, hosts a mid-week morning Bible study session for people of varying ages and occupations. Among the participants are nurses coming home from night duty and flight attendants on their day off. The participants practice *lectio divina* as they reflect on and prepare for the proclamation of the Scripture readings at the following Sunday's Eucharist. Sr. Quigg once heard a participant say, "This is the most important thing we do here!"

## Is *Lectio Divina* for Catechists?

Around the time of the new millennium, I had the privilege of meeting with eleven diocesan catechetical leaders from around the country. We participated in a week of seminars each summer at a different Catholic university. Selected as National Catechetical Scholars, we were sponsored by the National Catholic Educational Association (NCEA) and major publishers of catechetical materials. Each of us pursued a catechetical project under the leadership of Robert Colbert, the religion department director of NCEA.

During these sessions, one colleague, Sr. Finnuola Quinn, OP, designed a program for catechists in her Louisiana diocese that used *lectio divina* to foster a prayerful understanding of the justice themes found in the Lectionary readings of the liturgical year. As catechists practiced *lectio divina*, Sr. Quinn hoped, they would achieve a deeper understanding of concepts of justice as revealed in the sacred readings. Needless to say, Sr. Quinn returned the following summer with wonderful stories about catechists and *lectio divina*.

In the Diocese of Camden, New Jersey, where I have often served as a master catechist, our diocesan catechist formation courses always incorporate *lectio divina*. This "divine reading" offers a methodology that catechists can use in the parish with those they catechize, whether

they minister in Catholic schools or in parish religious education programs.

Catechists can find that *lectio divina* supports them as they undertake their ministry to teach the Word of God. As catechists pray with the Scriptures through *lectio divina*, their regular practice not only lays the foundation for an authentic expression of faith sharing, but it also serves as a resource for focusing communally on the teaching of Jesus found in the Gospels. *Lectio divina* correlates with the evangelizing mission of catechesis, which is no less than the mission of the Gospel, the mission of Jesus.

### One Simple Way to Engage in *Lectio Divina*

As catechists and Catholic school teachers gather at a planning or faculty meeting, they might spend time praying with *lectio divina*. In a peaceful setting they can begin in prayer before undertaking the tasks of their meeting. The reading chosen might be the Gospel read at Catechetical Sunday 2009 (the Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time), Mark 9:30-37. First, the Gospel passage is read aloud. After a few moments of quiet reflection, the same biblical text is read again. After the text is read and heard a second time, each of those gathered is invited to speak a word or phrase that he or she has heard in the reading. One at a time each person says a phrase, such as “he was teaching his disciples” or “the Son of Man will rise” or “receives one child such as this” or “the servant of all.” All those gathered offer, without any commentary or explanation, words or phrases that have touched them or that they have heard anew.

Next, the reading is proclaimed to the group a third time, and once again a brief time of reflection follows. Now catechists are asked to share any part of the reading that they find to be meaningful, instructive, or formative. In addition

to repeating the words of the Gospel, the individuals may also remark about family life, give some catechetical insight for the year of ministry ahead, or recall Jesus’ presence among them (see Mt 18:20). As people begin to share what they have heard in the reading and listen to one another’s insights, a spiritual bond can begin to form that can help each catechist deepen his or her relationship with God, who is present within the assembled community.

At this point in the meeting, other questions might arise in the catechists’ hearts: What is God communicating to us through the Word? What does this reading say to me personally? What does it mean for the catechists gathered here, or for the whole parish? Does the Word really function as a “two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12)? Does it cut to the heart? How does the Word help us to change our hearts? How will we carry this message from God gently and gratefully into our lives this week?

As one becomes familiar with *lectio divina*, one can adapt its simple methodology for use by any group in the parish, whether for the youth group or for ministry to seniors. *Lectio divina* can be a useful form of prayer for each stage of lifelong faith formation.

Article by Sr. Antoine Lawlor, IHM, DMin

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