

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.

Oratio - prayer

The Third step in *lectio divina* is *oratio* - prayer: prayer 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.

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.

2. The Underlying Rhythm of *Lectio Divina*

If we are to practice *lectio divina* effectively, we must travel back in time to an understanding that today is in danger of being almost completely lost. In the Christian past the words action (or practice, from the Greek *praktikos*) and contemplation did not describe different kinds of Christians engaging (or not engaging) in different forms of prayer and apostolates. Practice and contemplation were understood as the two poles of our underlying, ongoing spiritual rhythm: a gentle oscillation back and forth between spiritual "activity" with regard to God and "receptivity."

Practice - spiritual "activity" - referred in ancient times to our active cooperation with God's grace in rooting out vices

and allowing the virtues to flourish. The direction of spiritual activity was not outward in the sense of an apostolate, but inward - down into the depths of the soul where the Spirit of God is constantly transforming us, refashioning us in God's image. The active life is thus coming to see who we truly are and allowing ourselves to be remade into what God intends us to become.

In the early monastic tradition contemplation was understood in two ways. First was *theoria physike*, the contemplation of God in creation - God in "the many." Second was *theologia*, the contemplation of God in Himself without images or words - God as "The One." From this perspective *lectio divina* serves as a training-ground for the contemplation of God in His creation.

In Contemplation we cease from interior spiritual doing and learn simply to be, that is to rest in the presence of our loving Father. Just as we constantly move back and forth in our exterior lives between speaking and listening, between questioning and reflecting, so in our spiritual lives we must learn to enjoy the refreshment of simply being in God's presence, an experience that naturally alternates (if we let it!) with our spiritual practice.

In Ancient times contemplation was not regarded as a goal to be achieved through some method of prayer, but was simply accepted with gratitude as God's recurring gift. At intervals the Lord invites us to cease from speaking so that we can simply rest in his embrace. This is the pole of our inner spiritual rhythm called contemplation.

How Different this ancient understanding is from our modern approach! Instead of recognizing that we all gently oscillate back and forth between spiritual activity and receptivity, between practice and contemplation, we today tend to set contemplation before ourselves as a goal - something we imagine we can achieve through some spiritual technique. We must be willing to sacrifice our "goal-oriented" approach if we are to practice *lectio divina*, because *lectio divina* has no other goal than spending time with God through the medium of His word. The amount of time we spend in any aspect of *lectio divina*, whether it be rumination, consecration or contemplation depends on God's Spirit, not on us. *Lectio divina* teaches us to savor and delight in all the different flavors of God's presence, whether they be active or receptive modes of experiencing Him.

In *lectio divina* we offer ourselves to God; and we are people in motion. In ancient times this inner spiritual motion was described as a helix - an ascending spiral. Viewed in only two dimensions it appears as a circular motion back and forth; seen with the added dimension of time it becomes a helix, an ascending spiral by means of which we are drawn ever closer to God. The whole of our spiritual lives were viewed in this way, as a gentle oscillation between spiritual activity and

receptivity by means of which God unites us ever closer to Himself. In just the same way the steps or stages of lectio divina represent an oscillation back and forth between these spiritual poles. In lectio divina we recognize our underlying spiritual rhythm and discover many different ways of experiencing God's presence - many different ways of praying.

3. The Practice of Lectio Divina

Choose a text of the Scriptures that you wish to pray. Many Christians use in their daily lectio divina one of the readings from the Eucharistic liturgy for the day; others prefer to slowly work through a particular book of the Bible. It makes no difference which text is chosen, as long as one has no set goal of "covering" a certain amount of text: the amount of text "covered" is in God's hands, not yours.

Place yourself in a comfortable position and allow yourself to become silent. Some Christians focus for a few moments on their breathing; other have a beloved "prayer word" or "prayer phrase" they gently recite in order to become interiorly silent. For some the practice known as "centering prayer" makes a good, brief introduction to lectio divina. Use whatever method is best for you and allow yourself to enjoy silence for a few moments.

Then turn to the text and read it slowly, gently. Savor each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the "still, small voice" of a word or phrase that somehow says, "I am for you today." Do not expect lightening or ecstasies. In lectio divina God is teaching us to listen to Him, to seek Him in silence. He does not reach out and grab us; rather, He softly, gently invites us ever more deeply into His presence.

Next take the word or phrase into yourself. Memorize it and slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories and ideas. Do not be afraid of "distractions." Memories or thoughts are simply parts of yourself which, when they rise up during lectio divina, are asking to be given to God along with the rest of your inner self. Allow this inner pondering, this rumination, to invite you into dialogue with God.

Then, speak to God. Whether you use words or ideas or images or all three is not important. Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. And give to Him what you have discovered in yourself during your experience of meditatio. Experience yourself as the priest that you are. Experience God using the word or phrase that He has given you as a means of blessing, of transforming the ideas and memories, which your pondering on His word has awakened. Give to God what you have found within your heart.

Finally, simply rest in God's embrace. And when He invites you to return to your pondering of His word or to your inner dialogue with Him, do so. Learn to use words when words are helpful, and to let go of words when they no longer are necessary. Rejoice in the knowledge that God is with you in both words and silence, in spiritual activity and inner receptivity.

Sometimes in lectio divina one will return several times to the printed text, either to savor the literary context of the word or phrase that God has given, or to seek a new word or phrase to ponder. At other times only a single word or phrase will fill the whole time set aside for lectio divina. It is not necessary to anxiously assess the quality of one's lectio divina as if one were "performing" or seeking some goal: lectio divina has no goal other than that of being in the presence of God by praying the Scriptures.

4. Lectio Divina on Life

In the ancient tradition lectio divina was understood as being one of the most important ways in which Christians experience God in creation. After all, the Scriptures are part of creation! If one is daily growing in the art of finding Christ in the pages of the Bible, one naturally begins to discover Him more clearly in aspects of the other things He has made. This includes, of course, our own personal history.

Our own lives are fit matter for lectio divina. Very often our concerns, our relationships, our hopes and aspirations naturally intertwine with our pondering on the Scriptures, as has been described above. But sometimes it is fitting to simply sit down and "read" the experiences of the last few days or weeks in our hearts, much as we might slowly read and savor the words of Scripture in lectio divina. We can attend "with the ear of our hearts" to our own memories, listening for God's gentle presence in the events of our lives. We thus allow ourselves the joy of experiencing Christ reaching out to us through our own memories. Our own personal story becomes "salvation history."

For those who are new to the practice of lectio divina a group experience of "lectio on life" can provide a helpful introduction. An approach that has been used at workshops at St. Andrew's Priory is detailed at the end of this article. Like the experience of lectio divina shared in community, this group experience of lectio on life can foster relationships in community and enable personal experiences to be consecrated - offered to Christ - in a concrete way.

However, unlike scriptural lectio divina shared in community, this group lectio on life contains more silence than sharing. The role of group facilitators or leaders is important, since they will be guiding the group through several periods of silence and reflection without the "interruption" of individual sharing until the end of the

exercise. Since the experiences we choose to "read" or "listen to" may be intensely personal, it is important in this group exercise to safeguard privacy by making sharing completely optional.

In brief, one begins with restful silence, then gently reviews the events of a given period of time. One seeks an event, a memory, which touches the heart just as a word or phrase in scriptural lectio divina does. One then recalls the setting, the circumstances; one seeks to discover how God seemed to be present or absent from the experience. One then offers the event to God and rests for a time in silence.

Conclusion

Lectio Divina is an ancient spiritual art that is being rediscovered in our day. It is a way of allowing the Scriptures to become again what God intended that they should be - a means of uniting us to Himself. In lectio divina we discover our own underlying spiritual rhythm. We experience God in a gentle oscillation back and forth between spiritual activity and receptivity, in the movement from practice into contemplation and back again into spiritual practice.

Lectio Divina teaches us about the God who truly loves us. In lectio divina we dare to believe that our loving Father continues to extend His embrace to us today. And His embrace is real. In His word we experience ourselves as personally loved by God; as the recipients of a word which He gives uniquely to each of us whenever we turn to Him in the Scriptures.

Finally, lectio divina teaches us about ourselves. In lectio divina we discover that there is no place in our hearts, no interior corner or closet that cannot be opened and offered to God. God teaches us in lectio divina what it means to be members of His royal priesthood - a people called to consecrate all of our memories, our hopes and our dreams to Christ.

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From the Scriptorium

There are many excellent books out there on Lectio. Here are three that have been helpful for me. *Sacred Reading* by

Michael Casey, OCSO, is my personal favorite. Easy to read but at the same time a book of great depth, you will find yourself going back to this volume over the years. A second book, *Lectio Divina*, by M. Basil Pennington, OCSO, is also worth reading though his approach is a little different than Casey. Casey emphasizes the importance of following a book of the bible through to completion while Pennington believes using the daily readings from the Office or Mass is fine. The final book is *Praying the Bible* by Mariano Magrassi, but I found this book more useful after a second read and have been applying Lectio in my life for a while. It's better on the second read. But if you had to pick just one book to use, go with Casey's *Sacred Reading*.

The Ordo

The Solemnity of the Ascension is celebrated in the Diocese of Charlotte on Sunday, May 4. I am not sure about other diocese so check with your parish to make sure which day is celebrated in your diocese.

APRIL

- 21 Anselm, Bishop, Religious, Doctor of the Church. Memorial.
- 25 Mark, Evangelist. Feast.
- 27 Sixth Sunday of Easter.
- 29 Catherine of Siena, Virgin, Doctor of the Church. Memorial.

MAY

- 2 Athanasius, Bishop and Doctor. Memorial.
- 3 Philip and James, Apostles. Feast
- 4 Ascension of the Lord. Solemnity
- 11 Pentecost Sunday. Solemnity

Ordinary Time

- 12 The Second Week of the Psalter begins today
- 14 Matthias, Apostle. Feast
- 15 Pachomius, Abbot. Memorial
- 18 Trinity Sunday. Solemnity

May Meeting

Please mark your calendar for May 18, 2008. We will be taking up the Liturgy of the Hours, something that many of you requested. If you need to reach me please write to:

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