

The Prayer of *Lectio Divina*

Listening to God in Scripture

In lectio we do not seek so much to enlighten the mind or to move the will. Rather we seek the immediate experience of God. We seek to be present to God, who is present in his inspired Word, and let him speak directly to us. It is a direct, immediate encounter with our Friend, our Guide, our teacher, whom we love.

—M. BASIL PENNINGTON¹

In the Prologue to the Rule, St. Benedict encourages us to listen with the ear of our hearts. This is a deep kind of listening that is open and attentive. It is a listening that enables us to hear the God who is present in all of life, the God who reaches out to heal, to strengthen, to inspire, and to show where our help is needed. One of the best ways to listen to God is through Holy Scripture in a form of prayer called *lectio divina* (pronounced “lek’-see-oh deh-vee’-na”).

Lectio divina, which means “holy (or divine) reading,” is an ancient form of prayer that uses Scripture as a way to hear God’s word for us. At one time all Christians practiced this form of prayer. The art was preserved in the many Benedictine monasteries and convents around the world where time has always been set aside each day for this “holy reading.”

Why Pray with Scripture

The Holy Scriptures are an amazing gift. They offer us not only our spiritual history but the richness of Jesus—who he was, how he related to people, the miraculous things that he did, what was important to him, and who he is for us—and the wisdom and the energy of Paul. Through the words of Scripture, God reaches out to strengthen, heal, teach, and challenge. Scripture shows us the way to live and how we’re to relate to

God and to one another. The sheer beauty of its poetry and expression is yet another gift of Scripture. It's no wonder that Benedict rooted the Rule so firmly in the Word of God. The beauty of *lectio divina* is that it offers the gift of Scripture as a way to unite us with God and to recognize that we are personally loved by God.

The Prayer of *Lectio Divina*

To prepare for this prayer—or any type of prayer—quiet down so you can hear God's soft voice. Take a minute to focus on your breathing to calm and prepare yourself to listen. Then, continue with a prayer to the Holy Spirit for openness to the Spirit's guidance.

We Read the Passage Slowly: Lectio

The name used for this step is *lectio*, which is Latin for "reading." We read Scripture slowly. *Lectio divina* calls for a different way of reading. We tend to read a newspaper or a novel quickly, but *lectio* uses a slower pace that encourages us to savor each word instead of hurrying to the end. Let me offer a comparison. Think of whatever it is that you love to eat. Is it a great pasta dish or a rich and hearty stew, or perhaps one of those "sinful" desserts with apt names like "Death by Chocolate?" If you're like me, when you take the first bites, you take joy in the taste, chewing slowly, savoring flavors. (Yum!) That's the approach of *lectio*: we read slowly, savoring the words, for through these words God will speak to us and nourish our souls. As we slowly read, a word or phrase may catch our attention. This is God speaking to us.

It's helpful to read or whisper aloud, allowing us to both speak *and* hear God's Word. We can keep the pace slower when we read out loud, so that we're better able to hear God's quiet voice. Remember, we don't rush through a great meal. (At my house our holiday meals last six hours—a marathon of cooking and eating!) The Word of God is food to be savored slowly.

Trusting that God will speak to us through Scripture, we open ourselves to listen. M. Basil Pennington, a well-known author on prayer, explains that we "allow the Word to nourish us as the words are read not for information but rather for transformation."²

As we slowly read, a word or a phrase may catch our attention. For example, a text might speak to a situation or person we're struggling with in our own lives, or we might suddenly feel a sense of peace or hope. Sometimes I find that a phrase makes me think, "This is the same thing that's happening to me" or "That's exactly what I'm feeling" or "That's not what I'm doing now but maybe it's what God wants me to do." Whenever a word or phrase stands out for you, *even in the smallest way*, stop! Remember that God doesn't generally shout at us.

We Meditate on the Word or Phrase: Meditatio

The second step is *meditatio*, Latin for “meditation.” In this step we take in the word or phrase that grabbed us and ruminate on it, letting the text penetrate our being through repetition and reflection. The image of an animal quietly chewing its cud was used in antiquity as a symbol of the Christian pondering the Word of God.³ We must “take in the word—that is, memorize it—and while gently repeating it to ourselves, allowing it to interact with our thoughts, our hopes, our memories, our desires.”⁴

This repetition or chewing of the word or phrase was first explained in a fifth-century text by John Cassian. The “novice-master of western monasticism,” Cassian encouraged monks always to be in this stage of *meditatio*:

All do the work assigned to them, all the while repeating by heart some psalm or passage of Scripture. Thus they have no opportunity or time for dangerous schemes or evil designs, or even for idle talk, as mind and heart are ceaselessly occupied with spiritual meditations.⁵

While Cassian felt that *meditatio* was helpful in the discipline of monks, I find it’s helpful for ordinary people, too. As we chew on the text given to us by God, we explore what the word or phrase is saying to us and how it connects with our lives: the experiences, challenges, problems, opportunities, and emotions.

We Talk with God: Oratio

In the next step, *oratio*—Latin for “prayer”—we talk with God. St. Cyprian said, “In Scripture, God speaks to us, and in prayer we speak to God.”⁶ We carry on a conversation as if with a friend for, indeed, God *is* our friend. The wonderful thing about a good friend is that we can say anything, being totally honest, sharing our troubles, our most painful experiences, and our deepest joys. We talk to God about how we see the word or phrase of Scripture connecting with our lives, and ask God to show us this connection even more clearly.

In this dialogue with God we may find ourselves being changed. A nagging worry may lessen or a joy may increase. We may experience gratitude or a renewal of hope and trust in God.

You may be wondering how to know when to move from reflecting on the passage into this third step. In *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, Thelma Hall reminds us that God will take care of this for us.

It is when [the] love of God touches our heart that we are drawn into the next level: *Oratio*, or prayer. All else has been preliminary, for this is the real beginning of prayer.⁷

Oratio is “prayer of the heart” into which we are drawn by God. When we connect our lives to Scripture and find wisdom, hope, and strength, we realize that this is prayer given to us by God.

We Are Silent: Contemplatio

Finally, in *contemplatio* or “contemplation,” we stop *doing* and simply *be*, resting without words in God’s embrace. We still our hearts and our minds and are silent.

At some point we may become restless or distracted. That’s our clue to continue the slow reading or, if appropriate, to end our prayer with a prayer of thanksgiving.

As you go through your day, take the word or phrase with you. Write it down if that works for you. Repeat it throughout the day as a form of prayer and connection to God.

Some Prayer Tips

Remember that you don’t need to finish the whole psalm or selection of Scripture. If you don’t even move beyond the first sentence, line, or word, that’s fine. For those of us who have an “I’ve-got-to-finish-it-all-and-I’ve-got-to-finish-it-right-now” personality, this open-ended approach can be a real challenge. But whether we “finish” a passage or not isn’t the point. Fr. Luke Dysinger, a Benedictine monk, reminds us that “*lectio divina* has no other goal than spending time with God through the medium of His word. The amount of time we spend on any aspect of *lectio divina* depends on God’s Spirit, not on us.”⁸ This is wonderful news: you and I aren’t in charge, God is! So we can relax and simply accept the way God chooses to reveal God’s self. Father Dysinger writes, “Do not expect lightning or ecstasies.”⁹ So don’t be discouraged if “nothing” seems to happen in your prayer. And never judge your prayer or your ability to pray. *Lectio divina*, or any prayer for that matter, has much to do with trust. We trust that God hears us. We trust that God has something to say to us and will let us hear it. We trust that God will help us to pray. And we know our trust isn’t in vain for we know that God is faithful.

A Sample of *Lectio Divina*

The interlude for this chapter presents a brief example of *lectio divina* from my own experience. I’ve included it to give you an idea of how the four steps work. I encourage you to read this interlude found on pages 40–42 before you try *lectio divina* or use any of the tools in the Toolbox. Set aside some time for *lectio divina* at least three days a week. Listen to God with the ear of your heart.

~ Interlude ~

A Sample Prayer of *Lectio Divina*

This interlude offers a sample of a *lectio divina* on Psalm 23, to give you an idea of how the prayer may go. The Scripture from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible is in italics. You'll notice that I didn't finish the psalm. The goal isn't to finish, but to stop when a word or passage strikes you and then to explore what God might be saying through that word or passage. Our thoughts, questions, and feelings are all ways that God can speak to us.

I follow the format for prayer given in Tool #1 of the Toolbox for chapter 2. I've chosen a text—Psalm 23—and have it marked and ready before me. I'm alone and relaxed. After sitting quietly a few minutes, listening to my breathing, I acknowledge God's presence and offer a prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit: "Loving God, I come before you for your honor and glory and for my sanctification. I pray for the grace to respond to the presence of the Holy Spirit in this prayer. Help me hear your Word for me this day."

Read the Passage Slowly: *Lectio*

I then begin to slowly read the psalm that I have chosen for the prayer time.

*The Lord is my shepherd . . .
I shall not want . . .*

The second line resonates with me, especially the word "want," so I stop reading.

Meditate: *Meditatio*

I repeat the phrase over again several times.

I shall not want . . . I shall not want . . . I shall not want.

I explore the connection of the phrase with my life, realizing how many times over the last few days my wanting motivated my actions. Some desires were good, like wanting to help a friend by listening to her struggle raising two boys. Some things I wanted were focused on myself. I think, "If I want all these things is God really my shepherd? Am I spending too much time trying to meet these wants instead of letting God guide my life?"

Talk with God: *Oratio*

I begin to talk with God about what struck me in the passage.

Loving God, I say you are all I need but, in fact, I am always wanting so many things. I want to have meaningful work to do. I want to be able to finish that work. I want things to go well and become frustrated when they don't. I want people to do certain things or act in certain ways. I want to feel more close to you in prayer. I want things to go smoothly. I want to feel useful. I want some time to myself to relax. I want people to listen to me. See? I want and want and want.

How do I learn to want just you? How do I learn to let some things go that seem so important to me and just trust that you will provide me with what I need, *really* need?

I continue talking with God about this issue of wanting.

Be Silent: *Contemplatio*

When I feel there is no more I can say, I stop and listen to God. I open my heart and am silent before God. I use deep breathing to stay focused. For a time I am quiet and still.

After a time I feel restless and find myself thinking about things other than my prayer. I recognize the sign to move on.

The Steps of *Lectio Divina* Begin Again

I begin to slowly read once more (*lectio*).

He makes me lie down in green pastures . . .

He leads me beside still waters . . .

He restores my soul . . .

He leads me in right paths for his name's sake . . .

I stop reading at the last line and move into the second step (meditation). The passage reminds me that my life is not just for me: it is for God and for others. I then realize how I might learn to want just God and let other things go. I can truly let God guide my life along the right paths.

After reflecting a bit longer I move into the prayer, the third step (*oratio*) and begin again to converse with God.

Here is a clue, dear God: if I am able to embrace that my life is for you, I will want what you want for me. Help me to do that. Help me to expand my view of life, my view of what is important. You have guided me again and again . . . always and in all ways. My memory is so short. Forgive me for that. Help me to be on the lookout today for ways that you are guiding me and, through me, guiding others.

I then move into silence and rest in the presence of God in the last step of the prayer form (contemplation).

When once again I feel restless I begin reading again.

*Even though I walk through the darkest valley . . .
I fear no evil
For you are with me . . .*

I repeat the last line and give thanks that God is indeed with me.

Your rod and your staff—they comfort me . . .

At this point I realize that, although I'm reading the text, my mind is wandering and that my prayer time is drawing to a close.

I give thanks for what God has shown me in my *lectio divina* and move to my closing prayers.

I hope that this example gives you an idea of how simple holy reading is. It's conversation with a God who loves us and wants us to know the nearness of God's Presence.

Putting the Ideas into Practice

Take a favorite psalm or passage of Scripture and use the Toolbox for this chapter beginning on page 36 to guide your prayer of *lectio divina*.