

An introduction to **Lectio Divina**

by Margaret Crooks

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Part I: Listening with the ear of the heart

When you read scripture, are you reading in such a way that will enable you to hear the 'voice of life, the call of God'? Margaret Crooks explains how, through an ancient Christian practice of meditation, Lectio Divina, the Scriptures can speak with new power and insight.

There is a story about a young student who came to a rabbi and asked what he needed to do to become a teacher of the scriptures himself. The rabbi asked him "What have you done so far?" "I have gone through the Torah!" he replied. "Good" said the Rabbi, "but has the Torah gone through you?"

It is one thing to go through the scriptures, but an entirely different thing to let them take possession of our hearts and minds. "This is the intent of Lectio Divina," says author William Shannon.

Lectio Divina comes to us from the Benedictine tradition and means holy or sacred reading – but reading with a difference. Lectio is reading "with attitude". Lectio is reading, listening to the Word of God with "the ear of the heart" (St. Benedict) and responding to it both in our prayer and in the whole of our life. Prayer and Lectio are inseparably linked. Lectio is not a preparation for prayer, but prayer itself, where we allow the Word of God to have the freedom of our minds and hearts. We read, not to acquire information, but to interact with the Word of God, to be nourished by the Word and to respond to what God is offering us, because it is in Lectio that we meet God in such a way that it will change us – if we allow it. As Abbot Stephen Ortiger said, "the text is both a mirror in which I see myself and a window through which I gaze on God." We come believing/trusting that God is truly present in the text and allowing God to reach out and embrace us.

Basically Lectio is reflecting on a small portion of the text. It is a different approach to the way we would normally read the bible. It is a way of reading slowly and with reverence and appreciation. It is ruminating on the text, savouring the text until all the sweet juices are given up. It is a divine encounter where we have to learn to read slowly and with careful attention; we have to read the words of scripture over and over until they pierce us through. They are to be imprinted on our hearts and memories so that they can continually return to our minds.

Lectio Divina is a fluid process, which for ease of understanding, can best be described as a movement, a progression, stages which flow into one another:

Lectio – Meditatio – Oratio – Contemplatio – Evangelizatio – Ruminatio
(Read – understand/reflect – pray – be still – respond – continue to ponder.)

Lectio: or reading (our words lectern and lectionary come from the same root) – an eager seeking after the Word of God. The text is traditionally read aloud or the words formed with the lips, speaking them – generally very softly. Reading gives us the material we need to reflect upon.

Meditatio: Here the mind probes the scriptures, seeking the truth and wisdom hidden there. We ‘encounter’ God in the text. Read until a word or phrase “shimmers”, becoming alive with God for you. The intention is not to read until the end of the passage, but to seek God in it – to find the word through which God touches you, the word that becomes an image of God for you.

Read the text until a word or phrase attracts your attention. Then, even if you have read less than a verse, put the book aside and take that word or phrase and repeat it over and over, letting your body and heart hear it being addressed to you. Continue for as long as the Word speaks to you.

Oratio: or prayer – responding to the Word or phrase that has touched you. Do not try and force a meaning if it is not clear. In fact, do not try to force any sort of response. What is important will gradually emerge. You come to Lectio trusting that God will speak to you. So look at the Word, turning it over and over, asking what it means for you today, being aware of your emotional response, listening to God’s invitation to you and asking if there is some response you need to make to the Word.

Contemplatio: contemplation. This goes beyond all sense and thought. It is a resting in God, a still point in the process where you savour what has happened, letting the Word sink into you and receiving what God is offering – the Gift of His very self. Sometimes you will become lost to yourself as you move beyond words into a deeper intimacy with God.

Evangelizatio: the turning around to look at God, allowing God to transform you into the person you were created to be. This is a proclaiming of God by the witness of your life – living your response to the Word of God.

Ruminatio: the continued pondering or carrying of the Word within as you go about your daily tasks.

The process of Lectio goes round and round. It is one prayer, not so much a series of steps. The Word is carried in your heart throughout the day and continues to nourish you.

You may like to use a journal to dialogue with the text/with God/with yourself – asking questions like:

What do you want of me?

How can I hear what you are saying and allow it to shape my life?

How is my life touched by the Word?

Is there an invitation there for me?

Does the Word relate to what is happening in my life now?

How does it make me feel? Why?

And of course committing the words to memory is even better, as Joan Chittister says in her book *Psalm Journal*: “Memory may someday be our only aid to prayer in times of difficulty or illness or distance from the normal routines of life. When sight is dim and hearing diminishes, these verses that we hold in memory may well be all we have left of the universal answers to the great mysteries of life.”

Some years ago I was a parish worker and part of my weekly round was to go with the rector as he took the sacrament to the nursing homes. At one of the homes there was an elderly man called Frank. Each week Frank was guided into the room and seated in a chair. He would then begin rocking back and forth. He didn't join in, just rocked – until we reached the Lord's Prayer. Then he would stop and quite clearly and calmly join in. When we finished he would return to his rocking again. In some part of his poor, muddled brain, Frank remembered the Lord's Prayer and it brought him comfort.

I would like to ask you... what prayers ring in your hearts? What do you think about when you're not thinking about anything special? What memorized material runs through your minds, and why do you memorize what you do... and not your prayers?

When we come to *Lectio*, it must be without an agenda. Like all prayer, *Lectio* requires discipline. We come consenting to be open and to hear God's call and praying for strength to respond. We also come knowing that results aren't instant – it is in the waiting, the sitting with, the mulling over, that insights clearly emerge. We come allowing the Word to touch us and we can be surprised to discover that it can touch deep emotions.

In his first paragraph in the Rule, St Benedict is telling us how important it is not to allow ourselves to become our own guides, our own gods; that we must be willing to listen to the voice of God in our lives and the wisdom of others. “Benedict,” writes Joan Chittister “says: Listen today. Start now. Begin immediately to direct your life to that small, clear voice within” – the voice of life, the call of love.

Part II: Holy leisure – carrying the Word in your heart

A 9th century Benedictine said, “Someone who wishes to be always with God must pray often and read often. For when we pray, we speak to God, but when we read, God speaks to us.”

The reading he refers to is reflective reading.

Lectio Divina is holy or sacred reading, where we read with intent, allowing the Word of God to have the freedom of our hearts and minds – where we ‘trust’ God with our hearts and minds, with what is important to us at our deepest level. Where we allow God to speak to us.

Lectio is a very different approach to reading than the one we generally employ. In today's world we are overwhelmed with information and have learnt to read rapidly, selectively and critically, just to keep on top of it. Like so many things today, we do it hungrily and even acquisitively, with the purpose of taking charge and being in control.

Lectio shows us another way. *Lectio* offer us ‘holy leisure’, a space in the day for prayerful reading of the scriptures, where we read slowly, reverently and appreciatively. This is

reading – not for the gathering of information or to study, but to interact with the Word of God and to respond to what God is offering us today. It is where we allow God to take control.

St Benedict saw Lectio as an encounter with God. “Lectio disposes us to receive the gift of heavenly regard wherever it is offered on any day, to any of us.”

Lectio is a fluid process, which can be divided up into stages: Lectio-Meditatio-Oratio-Contemplatio-Evangelizatio-Ruminatio (Read-understand/reflect-pray-be still-respond-continue to ponder.) As Sr Hildegard Ryan says, “Lectio is a process not a method. Methods of prayer can be helpful, but they are often so organised that there is no room for God.”

Lectio means reading slowly, reflecting, praying with the Word, responding to the Word, carrying the Word in our hearts. There is no end to the cycle. It is a way of life and goes on wherever we are and in whatever we are doing.

Megan McKenna writes, “When we begin our Lectio we must be like the boy Samuel (1 Samuel 3:1-10). When he heard the voice of Yahweh he didn’t recognise it. Often we don’t recognise God’s voice speaking to us, but like Samuel we must say “Here I am Lord” as we stand before the text. And if we are silent and “ponder all these things in our heart” as Mary did, then we will give the Spirit a chance to speak to us and ourselves a chance to hear. The Word of God wants to... kindle something in us, stir us up, renew our hopes and dreams.”

In Lectio we interact with the sacred text. So how do we practice Lectio Divina?

First we must choose a text from the scriptures that we wish to pray with. Many people choose the day’s gospel reading from the lectionary. Others prefer to work slowly through a book of the Bible. The idea is not to cover or get through a certain amount of the text – the amount of material covered is in God’s hands, not yours.

1. Sit comfortably and relax, allowing yourself to become silent. You may wish to mark this time as a time of sacred or holy leisure by lighting a candle, knowing that it symbolises for you the light of Christ shining in the world. Gently, gently let go and relax, knowing that you are in the presence of God.

2. Now turn to the text and read it slowly and gently, savouring it, all the while listening for the word or phrase that is the Word of God for you today. Don’t expect the earth to move. God loves you, He won’t reach out and shake you. His invitation is like that still small voice Elijah heard – an invitation to move more deeply into the Divine presence and perceive things more clearly.

3. Next, take the word or phrase and repeat it slowly to yourself, savouring it and allowing it to interact with what has been happening in your life. Ask yourself: How does this Word touch my life today? What does it mean for me today? Repeat the Word, listening with the ear of your heart, hearing the Word being addressed to you personally.

Listen to your emotions. What are you feeling? – peacefulness, resistance, anger, sorrow? You may not like the way you are feeling, but that is alright. God is present with you in that feeling and will bring love and healing to that situation.

Explore how your life is touched by the Word. Listen to its invitation.

What is God asking of you with the word? Is there some response you need to make? Ask – how can I hear what You are saying and allow it to shape my life? Speak to God. Speak as you would to someone you know who loves and accepts you. Use a journal if you wish and dialogue with God/with the Word.

4. Savour what has happened. Sit silently in God's Presence, allowing Him to enfold and warm or stir your heart. Rest in God, letting the Word sink into you and receive what God is offering you – the Gift of His very Self. Sometimes you will become lost to yourself as you move beyond words into a deeper intimacy with God.

5. With Lectio, we haven't finished when we put our book aside and leave the room. We carry the Word with us in our hearts throughout the day. God's Word continues to nourish us and to gradually reveal its meaning to us as we "chew" or ruminate on it.

So let us look at a passage from the scriptures. Norvene Vest says one of the best examples is the Annunciation, (Luke 1:26-38). Here we see Mary, a devout Jewish girl, who has prepared herself to carry the Word made flesh by steeping herself in the Hebrew scriptures and being faithful to her religious practices. She lives her faith. It excites her and she believes that it will affect her life and the lives of her people.

Gabriel appears to Mary and she hears his word spoken to her. She ponders what he says to her and wonders what it might mean. At first she is alarmed!

Mary continues to ponder the meaning of Gabriel's words. She understands that what God has offered her is going to touch her life. God has invited her to be the mother of His son, who will be the long awaited saviour. As she explores the implications she realises that it will affect her life – her place in the community, her forthcoming marriage. She must feel fear and apprehension as she thinks about how her life will be touched by this invitation. She asks the question "How can this be?", knowing in her heart, the answer.

She realises that if she accepts God's invitation, nothing will ever be the same again.

She has heard the Word, pondered it, questioned it, accepted it. Then she responds in love: "Let it be with me according to your word." And she is transformed, her life is radically changed. But this is not the end. We see the fruits of Mary's pondering on the angel's message, her rumination as it were shows how she is changed, a change that continues through her life to the foot of the cross. Mary holds the true essence of Lectio – her pondering on all these things which were prophesied or spoken to her allowed them to form her into the one who gave birth to the Christ. She made herself available to the Word of God who became incarnate within her. And so can we.

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