

LECTIO DIVINA

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I LECTIO DIVINA - SOME DEFINITIONS

“... the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe” (*Deuteronomy 30:14*)

“The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart” (that is the word of faith that we proclaim); because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and is so justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.” (*Romans 10:8b-10*)

The word *Lectio* keeps present for us the need to “read” the written text of the Sacred Scripture whilst *Divina* reminds us that the text/word is “sacred, divine”.

The first question facing us is “What is *Lectio Divina*?” To this we can say that there is no one definition of *Lectio*. Each author and age has tried to give a better definition of this spiritual practise. No single definition contains all the elements of *Lectio* – rather each one complements the others. We will cite here some of the main definitions of *Lectio* given by the Christian tradition from the Middle Ages to our own time.

1. It is a pilgrimage in search of “the face of the Beloved beyond any sensible (of the senses) image, in the depths of the heart, in the most perfect silence”/”Learning to know the heart of God in the word of God”. (St. Gregory the Great)
2. It is the capacity to pass from the “written Word” to the “living Word”. (Mario Masini).
3. It is an exercise geared to the personal hearing of the Word of God. (Carlo Martini).
4. On the long journey of discovering the living Word the pilgrim of the scriptures is aware that there are oasis’ to be found in the text. (H. de Sainte-Marie).
5. In *Lectio* the Spirit gives us inner ears to hear the divine Word. (Karl Barth).
6. We cannot understand the scriptures without the help of the Holy Spirit. (St. Jerome).
7. The words of God contained in the scriptures are full of the Holy Spirit. (St. Hillary of Poitiers).
8. It is a means which the Spirit can use to give to the one who practises it the “mind of Christ”. (P. Eudokimou).
9. In the books I seek Christ. (St. Augustine).
10. The Second Vatican Council neither codified nor explicitly mentioned *Lectio Divina* yet it remains part of its theological perspective. The Council gave rise to an “epiphany” of the Word. Thus:
 - a) it provided for “a fuller reading of the sacred scriptures within liturgical celebrations” (*SC 35,1*)
 - b) it exhorted the faithful, especially religious, to grasp “the supreme knowledge of Jesus Christ” (*Philippians 3:8*) and it invited all Christians to a

“holy reading”, to an “assiduous sacred reading” of the “divine scriptures”, “accompanied by prayer” to facilitate the colloquium between the person and God (cf. *Dei Verbum* 25).

11. In *Lectio* we listen to God, in *Oratio* we speak to God (St. Ambrose)
12. *Lectio Divina* is a vigorous help to the monk in becoming ever more completely a man of God. (1967 Congress of the Benedictine Confederation).
13. *Lectio Divina*, the personal drawing close to the scriptures is a right of every baptised person and must be made accessible to them. (Carlo Martini).
14. You who walk in the gardens of the scriptures must not cross them either hurriedly or negligently. Dig into each word to draw out its spirit. Imitate the active bee which draws the honey from every flower. (Guerrigue d'Igny).
15. If *Lectio* is much more than a quick casual “glance” at the scriptures it is also less than a scientific “study”. (Mario Massini).
16. *Lectio Divina* is authentic when the heart opens to the influence of the Holy Spirit who, enlivening the flame of faith, allows us to discover in the pages of the Bible the treasures of divine wisdom and knowledge that are placed or hidden there: the unfathomable riches of the saving plan of the Father (cf. *Romans* 11:33; *Colossians* 1:27). (S.A. Panimolle).
17. *Lectio* is the link between the tree knowledge and the tree of life. (Guy-Marie Oury).
18. *Lectio* is the study of the things of God. (D. Gorce).
19. *Lectio* is a heart to heart contact between the person and God. (St. Bernard).
20. Examine the scriptures with care and the full attention of the soul. (Guy the Carthusian).
21. *Lectio Divina* is a prayed reading. (J. Leclercq).
22. To meditate each day on the words of the Creator – to learn to know the heart of God in the words of God. (Gregory the Great).
23. It is to listen to Christ through the scriptures. (Baroffio).
24. It is to experience the taste of God. (J.P. Emery)
25. *Lectio Divina* leads to prayer and contemplation so much so that it can be confused with them. (J.Leclercq).

II - INTRODUCTION TO LECTIO DIVINA

1 - THE OBJECT OF LECTIO DIVINA

The object of *Lectio Divina* are the sacred (divine) scriptures and this is why it is called "Divina". The scriptures were called the great library of the monks. And according to Rouse the monastic libraries and scriptoria stem from the practice of *Lectio Divina*. Gradually *Lectio Divina* will become synonymous with intellectual "study" but this intellectual movement in the monasteries will never lose its contact with its source which is *Lectio Divina*. We must also keep in mind that for the early monks and for those in the middle ages the scriptures could not be separated from the commentaries by the Fathers of the Church. This is why in the *Rule of Saint Benedict* speaks of *Lectio Divina* based not just on the scriptures but also on the writings of the Fathers and on those of the monastic tradition. In 1967 the Congress of Abbots approved a document on Benedictine life which preserves this same sense:

"The principal object of *Lectio Divina* must be the sacred scriptures, at the same time, however, it must embrace the Fathers, Tradition, the example and the teaching of the saints - the always living reflection of the Church throughout the centuries."

So, other books can be used which help us to have a deeper understanding of the scriptures (DV 8:23) without forgetting that it is the absolute centrality of the scripture which distinguishes *Lectio Divina* from spiritual reading. The difference here lies in their intrinsic value.

"In the sacred books (scripture) the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them. And such is the power and force of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigour, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life. Scripture verifies in the most perfect way the words: "The Word of God is living and active" (Heb 4:12), and "is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified" (Acts 20:32; cf 1 Th 2:13) [DV 21].

2 - CONSIDERATIONS

There are a number of points that we would do well to keep in mind:

- The Bible is inspired by God, thus: "it must be read and interpreted with the help of the same Spirit through whom it was written. (DV 12)
- In the Bible "God has spoken through human beings and in a human way" thus we should "carefully search out the meaning which the sacred writers really had in mind, that meaning which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of their words." (DV12)
- The Bible is a library made up of 73 books (46 of the Old Testament and 27 of the New Testament) composed by many authors but all inspired by the Holy Spirit who is the principal author "serious attention must be given to the content and unity of the whole of Scripture if the meaning of the sacred texts is to be correctly worked out. The living tradition of the whole Church must be taken into account along with the

harmony which exists between elements of the faith.” (DV12) This means that there is no contradiction between the various parts but rather a coherence by which they complement each other and are in perfect harmony. The content which stands at the centre and which unites the Scriptures is the person of Christ.

- Subjectively *Lectio* presupposes various conditions beginning with humility and purity of heart. If the reading of the Scripture is at the basis of the spiritual life it is also true that a good and spiritual life is a condition (*sine qua non*) of a fruitful reading.

The reader needs:

- To make a profession of faith that the Sacred Scriptures are truly the word of God (DV24).
- PRAYER. Prayer that the Lord will open our minds to understand the scriptures.
- To be attentive to the manner in which we hear or read:
 - “with an good and perfect heart” (Lk 8:15)
 - open and “docile” (1 Kgs 3:9)
 - willingly (DV 25)
 - “eagerly” (Acts 17:11)
 - “with perseverance” (Lk 8:15)
 - “assiduously” (Acts 2:42)
 - “every day” (DV25)
 - “at a set time” (*Rule of Saint Benedict* 48:1)
 - with calm and without haste, in an atmosphere of silence and recollection.
 - it is good to have a bible to use regularly and which becomes a friend.

Lectio Divina can be said to have three aims

1. Theological: to bring about conversation with God (DV25); to know the heart of God in the words of God (St. Gregory the Great) and to discern the signs of his will and the movements of his grace in the various happenings of daily life (PO18).
2. Christological: to obtain the supreme knowledge of Jesus Christ (Phil 3:8) to be able to see Christ in ever person. The person engaged in *Lectio Divina* should have their attention of Christ as their focal point.. The Old Testament prepares for and announces the coming of Christ in a prophetic way (Lk 24:44) whilst “The word God, (Christ) which is the power of God for the salvation of all who believe (see Rom. 1:16), is set forth and shows its power in a most excellent way in the writings of the New Testament (cf DV17).
3. Anthropological: that the man or woman of God be perfect and prepared for every good work (2 Tim 3:16). The scriptures are the well from which to draw the criteria for judging things correctly in their relationships to the final goal of the human person (AA4).

Some Practical Considerations

- a) Choice of Place. Because *Lectio Divina* is pre-eminently an act of prayer it should be practised in a place which allows for Silence, Recollection, Reflection and Prayer. We could perhaps put a bible (The word of God) or a candle (symbol of the Risen Christ present in his Word) or an icon of Christ in the place where we will pray.

b) Choice of Time. The question of a daily practise of *Lectio Divina* is one of the priority we wish to allow the Word of God to have in our life. The choice of the time of day is up to us because we need to find a moment of calm. It may be that we draw from the tradition of prayer first thing in the morning or of prayer in the evening of our day. If our days are busy and with little regularity it may well be that we have to become creative in our use of time in order to make space for *Lectio*. It is important, however, to maintain a certain regularity because this will help us, little by little to make this practise a habit.

C) Choice of Theme. There are many ways in which we can approach this choice and here we have the greatest liberty.

- One could choose to read the whole of the bible or one book of the bible from beginning to end. This is a continuous *Lectio* and gives us a degree of familiarity with the scripture.
- It is possible to chose to follow the liturgical lectionary for the Mass or the Office of Readings. This allows for a semi-continuous *Lectio*. It is important to chose only one of the texts. As regards the length of the text for *Lectio* just a few verses can be sufficient.
- It doesn't matter which system we choose - the important element is to begin and to persevere. If we have chosen a particular book of the bible for *Lectio* then we should persevere with the whole book - not just taking the attractive verses; our faith is in the whole Word of God as inspired. Every page of the scriptures both contains and reveals the unique saving mystery of God.
- The practise of *Lectio* is not intended to replace liturgical prayer (Mass/Breviary) rather there is a tight bond between the two as between a flame and the atmosphere in which it burns. For the Christian life both are necessary and both warm our hearts.

III – HISTORY OF LECTIO DIVINA

In the Jewish Tradition

If we are to look for the roots of the practise of *Lectio Divina* we must look to the Jewish tradition.

The first place to look is to the liturgical practise in the synagogue. The scriptures were proclaimed, interpreted and preached in the synagogue with readings from the Torah and then from the Prophets. The aim of this practise was to enable the Jews to savour the Torah as a community within a liturgical context.

This spiritual experience within the synagogue was then to continue in the daily life of the ordinary Jew. They sought to learn by heart (because written texts were extremely rare) that which they had heard in the liturgy. This “hearing” of the Word which became memory involved the whole person, body, heart and spirit - a constant repetition so that even a whisper (μεδεταω) was sufficient to bring the text to life. Alongside the joy (Ps 1:2; 37:30; 119) of meditating thus on the law there were a number of necessities:

- assiduousness (Joshua 1:8)
- a just concern to dedicate the best portion of our time to God “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” (Deut 6:4-7)
- an inner humility without which we cannot “hear” the Word of God.

The rule of the Qumran Community confirms this practise of a meditative reading of the law: “to prepare a way in the desert” (Is 40:3) means nothing less than an assiduous study of the law. To better live the covenant the members of the community studied the law day and night. This finds an echo in the Carmelite *Rule of Saint Albert* “die ac nocte in legge Domini meditantes” (pondering day and night the law of the Lord).

In the Christian Tradition

Other than reading within the liturgical celebrations it is difficult to be sure what influence the Jewish tradition had on a personal reading of the scripture during the first Christian generations. The Fathers were the ones to introduce the Christians to a reading of the scriptures in their spiritual lives.

It is perhaps the Christian ascetics of Antioch and Alexandria that we find the handing on of a tradition of a method of reading - especially in the spiritual experience of Cyprian of Carthage: “sit tibi vel oratio assidua vel *Lectio*: nunc cum Deo loquere, nunc Deus tecum. (give yourself either to constant prayer or to reading: at one time speaking with God, at another allowing God to speak with you.)” The success of this formula will mark the whole on antiquity until the middle ages.

However, it is with Origen (d. 250) that we can say with certainty that we can recognise *Lectio Divina* (Θεια αναχνοσιζ), (Letter to Gregory the Thaumaturge). Perhaps Origen had learned from his Hebrew teachers how to read the scriptures and apply them to his own life (προσεχειν). He always uses this word to with reference to *Lectio Divina* and it lies at the basis of the whole ascetical process. Origen asks that we be attentive and assiduous - returning each day to the well of the scriptures. In our reading we must ask of God what we

do not understand and what we do not have “this is why it is absolutely necessary to pray in order to understand the things of God. (Letter to Gregory...)

After Origen the authors of the golden Patristic era (Basil, John Crisostom, Jerome, Athanasius, Ambrose etc.) do nothing more than develop Origen’s ideas on the place of *Lectio Divina* in the contemplative life. For Jerome we must: “leggere non ad laborem sed ad delectationem et instructionem animae” (Ep. 130, 15). This biblical catechesis of the Fathers was for all Christians - the liturgical reading of the Word in common had to be made fertile by a personal commitment in the home (Ambrose and John Chrisostom). For John C. The reading of the Scripture was not just a matter for monks but rather for the laity whose need was greater than the monks. Little by little, however, notwithstanding the catechesis by the Fathers the practise of *Lectio Divina* became exclusively a monastic practise. The reason for this was simple - monks and virgins had the time to give to dedicate themselves (vacare Deo) to reading and to meditating on the Word.

In the early Monastic Tradition

Very rapidly the reading of the Bible took up the central place in the life of the monks with the psalms and other scriptures learnt by heart and with the reading of holy books. The first task of a monk was to learn the Psalter. This process, however, was not just a learning exercise - this reading and reciting was always in the context of an “interior dialogue/comparison between the Word and the heart”.

We know for example the great influence of the Word in the life of St. Antony (Father of Monasticism d. 356) who was converted after hearing Matt 19:21 read in the Liturgy. According to Athanasius Antony and his disciples gave their time to *Lectio Divina* (φιλολογεω rather than μεδεταω).

Pacomius and his disciples spent their time in a continuous reading and meditation on the Word with “great commitment” learning each section of the Scriptures by heart.

We can note this link between reading and meditation in the *Rule of Saint Benedict* (48). This speaks of memorising the Word for different reasons 1) liturgical use 2) to enable continuous prayer throughout the day 3) to learn how to “savour/taste” the reading of the Word of God.

There is no doubt that the scriptures were the source of the ascetical and monastic doctrine of Basil of Cesarea and Gregory Nazienzen. In the desert the reading of the Word of God and the meditation of the Word of God gave balance to monastic life. We should not forget the influence of Gregory the Great (540-604) in the development of the practise of *Lectio Divina* in the middle ages up till the twelfth century when the Cistercians rediscovered the Greek Fathers. He spoke of “ruminatio” and “masticatio” in the context of *Lectio Divina*.

In the Monastic Tradition of the Late Middle Ages

We find constant reference to *Lectio Divina* throughout the practises of the Benedictines, Cistercians and the Carthusians. It is in this context that we encounter St. Bernard who, according to William of St. Thierry (one of the great sources for *Lectio Divina*) was formed by *Lectio Divina* “without ceasing he was occupied with prayer, reading and meditation” (Life of St. Bernard 4:24). William’s famous Golden Letter will mark the spirituality of Western Monasticism. It is to Guy the Carthusian (d. 1188) that we owe the traditional steps in *Lectio Divina*: *Lectio*, *Meditatio*, *Oratio*, *Contemplatio*. However - he is not an original thinker but provides us with a synthesis of a pre-existent practise.

In the Carmelite Tradition

According to Alessandro Vella, O.Carm., our Order, a community of hermit-brothers whose lives revolved around the Word of God, was born at the beginning of the 13th century within this context of a prayed reading of the Bible.

The *Carmelite Rule of Saint Albert* itself is a small masterpiece of *Lectio Divina*, a whole mosaic of biblical texts. There is not a line from which biblical references or expressions are absent. However, it is clear that Albert did not write the *Rule* with the Bible open before him so that he could copy out the texts. In fact, it is quite rare that he quotes word for word. Albert was well acquainted with the Scriptures, they provided his mental framework and the air that he breathed. He lived from the Scriptures and they became a part of him - so much so that he uses the words of the Bible as if they were his own... and so they were.

It is because Albert was so filled with the Word of God that he could do no other than to give us a lifestyle which revolves around the same Word. The principal daily activity which he proposes to every Carmelite is to remain in his cell “day and night. meditating on the Law of the Lord and keeping watch in prayer.

In Albert’s day “meditation” meant to repeatedly read the Scriptures aloud to learn them by memory so that the Word could come to the heart where it could become prayer, dialogue with God.

Traditionally the hermits used the Psalter more than any other biblical book for their prayer (even to the point of praying the whole Psalter each day. It is in this context that we must understand the references to the psalms in our *Rule*. Albert could not have prescribed the celebration of the divine office because this was one of the signs of clerical/religious life whilst he was writing for a group of lay people. One should note that Albert speaks of the psalms straight after he has said that the hermit-brother should remain in his cell and also that the original *Formula Vitae* (*Way of Life* document) was not divided into chapters. Thus, in speaking of the psalms, Albert is still explaining how the Carmelite spends time in his cell: meditating, keeping watch in prayer and praying the psalms, i.e. *Lectio Divina*. It is only when Innocent IV adapted the *Rule* that the meditative praying of the psalms in the cell became the community celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours.

We do however find a space for a community hearing of the Word of God in Albert’s *formula vitae*: the Eucharist which is at the centre of the life of the hermit-brothers and of the structure of their hermitage. Another space was added later, with the adaptation by Innocent IV - the reading of the Scriptures during meals. This common practise acquires a specific meaning in the context of our *Rule* in as much as it offers another opportunity for the community to hear (*communiter*) the Word of God.

Nourished in this way by the Word the Carmelite is strengthened by holy thoughts so that the Word of God may *live abundantly on his lips and in his heart*. In this phrase of Chapter 14 we find a clear description of Chapter 7 *meditating on the Law of the Lord day and night*. For Albert and for the first generation of Carmelites *meditation* meant precisely this: *that the Word should live abundantly on the lip and in the heart*. One could almost see the Carmelites in their cells murmuring the words of the Scriptures and savouring them in their hearts. This practise of *Lectio Divina* has a very precise aim. The Word of God is above all the revelation of his will. Thus the motivation for having it always on the lips and in the heart is to put it into practise: *let all that you do be done in the Word of the Lord* (Chapter 14)

According to Carlos Mesters, O.Carm., the *Carmelite Rule* teaches us 8 ways of reading the Bible.

- 1) Read the scriptures during meals in the dining room. (Ch. 4)
- 2) Meditating the Law of the Lord day and night (Ch 7)
- 3) Praying the psalms (hours) (Ch. 8)

- 4) Daily Eucharist (Ch 9)
- 5) Being strengthened by holy thoughts (Ch 14)
- 6) The Word of God should dwell on the lips and in the heart (Ch 14)
- 7) Always work in accordance with the Word of God (Ch 14)
- 8) Frequent reading of the letters of St. Paul (Ch 15)

It seems that the medieval Carmelites followed the tradition and in a real way made the Word of God the centre of their lives. This can be seen by, among other facts, that at the universities of Oxford and Paris in the 14th and 15th Centuries more Carmelites wrote biblical commentaries than Dominicans, Franciscans and Augustinians. The other Orders distinguished themselves in other areas but Scripture was the privileged area of the Carmelites.

We should not forget that we find the Scriptures at the centre of Carmelite life in the first Carmelite texts: the *Ignea Sagitta* (1270) by Nicholas the Frenchman, and the *Institutio Primorum Monachorum* (*Ten Books on the Way of Life and Great Deeds of the Carmelites*, better known as *The Book of the First Monks*), compiled c.1385 by Felip Ribot. In the *Ignea* Nicholas comes across as an educated man, well versed in the Scriptures and in the Biblical science of his day; he makes references to the Fathers of the Church and other ecclesiastical authors. The Scriptures form the source of his writing, especially the Lamentations of Jeremiah and the psalms along with other references to the Old and New Testaments. (Cf. Dario Cumer, *Primi Scritti Carmelitani*, Città Nuova - OCD, Rome 1986, p.59)

“The Institution of the First Monks presents the prophet Elijah as the one who initiates the monastic-eremical way of life which seeks “to achieve prophetic perfection and the goal of the monastic-eremical life according to the law received from God (Ch. 9)” and who spent his days and filled his solitude with prayer and meditation on the Word of God in the prophets. (Cf. Dario Cumer, pp. 116 -117).

Returning to the thought of Alessandro Vella, O.Carm., we can say that with the arrival of the *Devotio Moderna* a more psychologically-based form of systematic meditation (cf. Ignatius of Loyola & Teresa of Jesus) took the place of *Lectio Divina* and the Bible lost much of its importance in the spiritual life. Another influence on this was the rise of Protestantism. This continued as a general tendency in the Catholic Church until Vatican II.

We can say the same for our Order. There are, however, two notable exceptions within our tradition: Thérèse of Lisieux and Elizabeth of the Trinity. Both lived at the end of the last century when spiritual books were valued much more than the Bible and it was almost impossible to have access to a complete text of the Bible. Yet, in this unfavourable climate both Thérèse and Elizabeth built their spiritual lives on the Bible.

In her *Manuscript A* Thérèse writes that during prayer: “if I open a book composed by a spiritual author (even the most beautiful and touching) I feel that my heart remains without the possibility of meditating ... In this inability my help comes from the Sacred Scriptures and the Imitation of Christ: in these I find a solid and completely pure nourishment. Above all it is the Gospel which sustains me in moments of prayer: in these I find all that my poor small soul needs. I find there both new light and hidden, mysterious meanings”.

In the Scriptures she found that which no confessor or spiritual director could give her: light on her personal vocation in the Church and on her original spiritual experience.

Elizabeth of the Trinity was a great disciple of St. Paul. In her writings she cites him a lot and uses his words to express her own thoughts and feelings. Elizabeth had a way all of her own for reading Paul and the Bible in general. In the Bible she didn't just contemplate God's saving plan - she allowed herself to become involved. She saw herself and her vocation there. Elizabeth doesn't seek to explain the sacred text but rather allows herself and the mystery of

her spiritual experience be explained, described and recounted by the biblical words. Hearing the Word of God, Elizabeth comprehends herself and her vocation.

Thérèse and Elizabeth, however, were exceptions. The overwhelming majority of their Carmelite brothers and sisters continued to live with scarce contact with the Word of God and the most common method of prayer continued to be the systematic meditation adopted by the *Devotio Moderna*.

In the Church it was quite properly in the context of the religious life that *Lectio Divina* was rediscovered. Some monks (Jean Leclercq, Magrassi and others) in studying the Fathers of the Church and medieval authors understood how important the Word of God was for them and that their method of prayer was, in fact, *Lectio Divina*. They then promoted *Lectio Divina* as one way to “return to the sources” as required by *Perfectae Caritatis*.

Within Carmel the rediscovery of *Lectio* stems from a serious study of the *Rule of Saint Albert*. Little by little we have understood that *Lectio Divina* was a foundational element of our tradition.

The 12th Council of Provinces which was celebrated at Salamanca in September 1991 committed itself to promoting *Lectio Divina* in the whole Order.

IV – STAGES OF LECTIO DIVINA

We must begin by saying that the value of the different stages in *Lectio Divina* is more theological than chronological. They signify the steps which allow *Lectio* to become a total prayer - in the Word of God, “read” and “meditated” there is an encounter with God which is expressed in “prayer” and made concrete in “practise/action” and which reaches the heights of “contemplation” where the soul “hides itself in the secret of God”. (Cf. William of St. Thierry)

We are not dealing with stages in the sense of a hop, skip and a jump. A better example would be a piece of music which grows in beauty as the different themes inter-twine or perhaps the image of a dance (sometimes used as an image of the Trinity).

Seek in READING
and you will find in MEDITATION;
knock in PRAYER
and it will be opened to you
in CONTEMPLATION.

(St. John of the Cross - paraphrase of Lk 11:9)

SACRED TEXT:

The text is always our starting point - we seek to plumb the depths of Gods Word. Our faith teaches that God is present in his Word and we “seek the face of the living God”. As it is our starting point so it is the point to which we will constantly return to draw afresh from the inexhaustible riches of Christ.

LECTIO:

The first thing we should do when we begin *Lectio* is to pray to the Holy Spirit to give us the grace that we need to understand the Word and the grace to live that Word. It is important that we have an atmosphere of exterior and interior silence to be able to hear that Word of God which is spoken in silence and which must be heard in silence by the soul. (John of the Cross). We are not engaged in exegesis but in prayer. As we read we hear the voice of God speaking to us. It is the moment of “fides ex audito” (*Romans* 10:17) - the faith that is born from hearing the voice of Christ. We are seeking to discover the voice of God in his Word and so we must read attentively - not in the sense of reading a novel but slowly, repeatedly. We are entering into a process of conversion of heart and mind - it is a process of purification.

Our reading should resemble that of a child who is learning to read - slowly, little by little, without haste. If we have the time then we are able to begin to commit the text to memory. Our reading should be a hearing of the Word and it may well be helpful if in our prayer we read the word aloud (old tradition of speaking the breviary “sotto voce”) words do not exist on paper but in language/speech. Our hearing of the Word implies an openness to the Word - a need for the Word.

This period of *Lectio* can be further extended in such a way as to help us deepen our understanding of the text for prayer. Some of the following may be helpful:

- reading the original texts (Hebrew/Greek)
- comparing different translations
- linguistic analysis - what the words mean in their original context.
- the use of biblical dictionaries/commentaries

- use of different scientific biblical tools - form criticism etc.

However, these are always at the service of our reading of the Word for prayer and not an end in themselves. They can run the risk of distancing the word to what it means out there rather than giving access to our hearts.

MEDITATIO:

In meditation we seek the meaning of the text -- here the Fathers speak in process terms using graphic imagery - rumination, mastication, regurgitation that we may "taste" the Word - experience the flavour of the Word - on the "palate of the heart". This involves time and begins from a standpoint of humility of heart - a sense of wonder and awe in the presence of God. This is a slow process - a going over and over the word in our minds like mill stones grinding the wheat - like grapes being crushed in the press so that that precious flour or wine can fall on our hearts. We need to listen with the ears of the heart and with the truth of our lives.

Meditatio is not just a mental exercise - we approach the Word of God as concrete human beings and as concrete communities with very clearly defined realities of sin and grace. We each have a context in which the practise of *Lectio Divina* takes place which is the reality of our lives. Meditating on the Word of God allows us to see our lives in the light of this Word - it allows the "gladsome light" of the Gospel to illuminate the darkness of our lives within the context of the all powerful mercy of God. It is a call to conversion and growth in the Gospel.

Here is a stumbling block for our pride. Often as we begin to practise *Lectio Divina* we find great joy. It is as though God is encouraging us. Then, as we become aware of the truth of our lives we can be tempted to lose heart. Many writers recommend that we have a guide and spiritual director who will help keep us centred on the Gospel and not on ourselves.

As we take time in meditation we should see if there is one phrase or word from the text which strikes us with particular force - the question then to ask is why? There is a real dialogue between the Word of God and the reality of our lives. If often what is highlighted is not something we would wish to shout about let us still rejoice - a dialogue is between equals - God deigns to call us friends - *Lectio* is the loving conversation between friends. The place to bring this reality of our lives is to prayer.

ORATIO:

"Prayer is not a lot of thinking but a lot of loving" (Teresa of Jesus)

"... prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may talk together; for "we speak to Him when we pray; we hear Him when we read the divine saying." (*Dei Verbum* 25)

In the Christian tradition God speaks to us first but then awaits our response in prayer. "When you read the spouse speaks to you; when you pray he listens" (St. Jerome). *Lectio* seeks to transform the very Word of God into prayer. There are a variety of ways in which we can respond to God in prayer - according to the needs we are aware of. The Fathers noted four principle ways of prayer:

Oratio Compunctionis (moved to remorse: punct = pricked) Like a piercing of the heart - an awareness like Isaiah 6:5 or like Peter's invitation in Acts 2:37 where there is a felt need of conversion. Here the Word of God is like a sword of light

cutting us from head to foot, leaving us naked, moving us to cry out in pain, moving us to tears; giving us the sense that we are sinners in need of a radical conversion.

Oratio Petitionis To know to ask the Father in the name of his Son Jesus Christ (Lk 11:9-10) - it is to seek in order to find. What should we ask - the gift of the Holy Spirit. All the moments of our lives, even those of greatest infidelity, are moments of salvation. Sin is never the last word - that belongs to God. We need to ask for conversion of heart because change is always possible - God is always able to great things for us.

Oratio Eucharistica Giving thanks with a sense of wonder at the graciousness of God who fills our poverty with his own wealth. We need to learn to give thanks from within the concrete reality of our lives where God is active with his provident love.

Oratio Laudativa Prayer full of joy, spontaneity and creativity in the presence of the Word of God.

Lectio helps us fulfil the command to pray always and in all the circumstances of our lives. As the light of God's Word gives light to our lives so we bring that area of life to God in Prayer.

CONTEMPLATIO:

Contemplation is always the free gift of God - **IT CANNOT BE TAUGHT**. It is, however, the normal flowering of the grace of baptism. We are created for the communion with God. The practise of *Lectio Divina* is not a four step programme whose end result is contemplation. Rather it helps us dispose ourselves and our lives to receive the free gift of God's presence. It helps us to play our humble part in removing the obstacles to grace. It is the entry into silence. Thelma Hall describes it thus:

Contemplation is a strange new land, where everything natural to us seems to be turned upside down - where we learn a new language (silence), a new way of being (not to do but simply be), where our thoughts and concepts, our imagination, senses and feelings are abandoned for faith in what is unseen and unfelt, where God's seeming absence (to our senses) is his presence, and his silence (to our ordinary perception) is his speech. It is the entering into the unknown, letting go of everything familiar we would cling to for security and discovering that in being "wretchedly and pitifully poor, and blind and naked too" (Rev 3:17) (which grace reveals to us and which we fear to acknowledge - much less accept - in ourselves) lies the potential for all our hope and joy, because to know our true selves is to know that we are loved by God beyond all measure. (Thelma Hall, *Too Deep for Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, New York, Paulist Press, 1988, pp. 49-50).

OPERATIO:

And so back to life - to live in a new way - to be changed, graced and to fail. To deepen the space which God desires to fill - to return daily to the source of life and love - to come to Jesus the Word of God. And so back to life - to live in a new way