

Lectio Divina: A Call to Serene Contemplation and Social Commitment

By Joe Colletti, Ph.D.

The art of Lectio Divina has evolved into four traditional steps for us today. The first step is reading, the second step is meditation, the third step is prayer, and the fourth step is contemplation. There are two related steps that I have added, however, that invite us to engage in further actions that will change others and ourselves. They are compassion and action.

The first step of reading (lectio) is an act of reverential listening that is based on the idea that when we read scripture we are listening to God speaking to us. When we begin to reflect on the meaning of the words we enter into the next step of meditation (meditatio). This second stage involves reflecting on the values that one finds revealed by the text. Thus, the transition from hearing the text to interacting with the text makes this step an important one. The third step of prayer creates a dialogue with God. The passage from meditation to prayer allows one to take one's experiences of the first two steps to God for further revelation. The next step of contemplation allows one to not only accept divine revelation but also to rest in God's transforming embrace. It is at this point our earlier efforts of communion with God may become obstacles and passive receptivity is required for further growth in one's relationship with God. It is at this point that we can come to realize our responsibility of compassion and action.

Background

The ancient practice of Lectio Divina (sacred reading) has waxed and waned throughout the centuries. The roots of this form of prayer have been traced back to Judaism.¹ Two early church leaders credited with establishing the practice within their cultures were Origen (185-254) and Ambrose (340-397). It was Saint Benedict (480-543), however, who promoted and refined its use.² Benedict, in his rule for monks³, wrote that sacred reading should occur during fixed hours of time (chapter 48.1), should be linked with prayer (chapter 4.55-56), and take place during special times of study (chapter 8). In addition, Benedict specified that sacred reading should occur during meals (chapter 38.1) and in community gatherings like Vespers and Compline, the final prayer offices of the day (chapter 42).

¹ Father Juhn Belmonte, S.J., "Bridging the Gap: Lectio Divina, Religious Education, and the Have-not's.

² Norvene Vest, **No Moment Too Small: Rhythms of Silence Prayer & Holy Reading**. (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1994) pp. 59-62..

³ **The Rule of St. Benedict** translated with introduction and notes by Anthony C. Meisel and M. L. del Mastro. (New York: Doubleday Image Book, 1975).

Reading the Word

The first step of lectio divina is appropriately called lectio (reading). At this point, it is important to distinguish between praying and reading. Quite simply, when we pray we speak to God and when we read God speaks to us. Thus, lectio is not ordinary reading. It involves listening or hearing scripture. More importance should be given to listening to the word than reading it. The Rule of St. Benedict opens with the words "Listen (ausculta), my son, and with your heart hear the principles of your Master." Benedict also encourages us in the Prologue of the Rule to let the scriptures stir us "and attentively hear the Divine voice, calling and exhorting us . . ." In other words, lectio is reverential listening. Our desire should be to personalize scripture and understand the words as God speaking at that moment of time.

We need to realize that within the context of lectio, reading Scripture is something different than what we normally do when we read a book. Often, we read a book for information or as a means of entertainment. The practice of lectio is not a monologue with God, but a dialogue with God. Thus, completing the first step of reading/listening involves choosing a text and reading it slowly. As you read it listen to the words closely. Read it over again and give careful attention to the literal sense of the text.

Now, before you begin the lectio first say "I hear God saying to me" as a means of preparation before reading the text. At this point, I often reflect on the words of wisdom given at the beginning of the following proverbs that also may be useful for you:

Proverbs 2.1 – "My child, if you accept my words and treasure up my commandments within you . . ."

Proverbs 4.1 – "Listen, children, to a father's instruction, and be attentive, that you may gain insight . . ."

Proverbs 5.1 – "My child, be attentive to my wisdom; incline your ear to my understanding . . ."

Proverbs 7.1 – "My child, keep my words . . ."

You may also find reading Proverbs 2. 1-10 helpful, I certainly do. Try reading it slowly, and again, and again.

My child, if you accept my words
and treasure up my commandments within you,
making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding;

if you indeed cry out for insight, and raise your voice for understanding;
if you seek it like silver, and search for it as for hidden treasures—
then you will understand the fear of the Lord
and find the knowledge of God.
For the Lord gives wisdom; from his mouth come knowledge and understanding;
He stores up sound wisdom for the upright;
He is a shield to those who walk blamelessly,
guarding the paths of justice and preserving the way of his faithful ones.
Then you will understand righteousness and justice and equity, every good path;
for wisdom will come into your heart,
and knowledge will be pleasant to your soul;

Once again say "I hear God saying to me" and begin to read your chosen text. Listen closely, for what you will soon hear is more than what the words in themselves convey. Just as we convey volumes in a phrase to a love one, so does God convey to us. You are listening to the living word of God. Often I am gripped by part of the text, or just a verse, and at times a phrase or word. As I repeat these words I hear God saying these words to me. This causes me to reflect on the meaning of the words, and it is at this point that I begin to enter into the next step, meditation.

Meditating the Word

As noted above, lectio involves listening to the text. The next three steps necessitate responding to the text. Meditatio (meditation) has been described as ruminating, pondering, and pronouncing the text.⁴⁵ Ruminating simply means chewing the cud. A cow, for example, regurgitates a mouthful of previously swallowed food and slowly chews it a second time. Thus, chewing the cud has come to mean recalling and thinking over the text.

Benedict encourages us to "attentively hear the Divine voice (in Prologue)." Hearing God's voice involves reading God's word. Remember, when you pray you are speaking to God and when you read God is speaking to you. So, the process of Lectio Divina includes listening to God speak to you. I would like to suggest that you hear the words that you are reading as addressed to you. For me, some past examples include:

"Listen, *Joseph*, to (your) father's instruction,
and be attentive, that you may gain insight . . ." - (Proverbs 4.1)

⁴ Fr. Luke Dysinger, O.S.B., "Accepting the Embrace of God: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina." *Valyermo Benedictine* (Spring, 1990): pp. XX-XX;

*"Joseph, be attentive to my wisdom;
incline your ear to my understanding . . ."* - (Proverbs 5.1)

*"Joseph, I Have Called You By Name,
(and) You Are Mine. - (Isaiah 43.1b)*

*...You Are Precious In My Sight, Joseph,
And Honored, And I Love You. - (Isaiah 43.4)*

Thus, pondering is not meant to be a silent meditation. It is meant to be interactive. We should not only take in the words through our eyes but through our ears as well. Also, when we hear God's word we should be willing to respond. The story of the Annunciation offers such an example. The passage is as follows:

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and **pondered** what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."

Praying the Word

Oratio (prayer) is our response to God. The first two steps—reading and meditating—involves God communicating to us. This next step involves communicating to God. The first two steps allow the words to touch and awaken our heart. Now that one listened to God's words one should allow them to penetrate one's heart. To do so means to take the words that God has communicated and to let them change our deepest self.

Our deepest self can be changed in two ways. The first way is through love and desire and the second way is through healing and mercy. Love and desire are two feelings that surface when we yearn to do God's will. "As a deer yearns for running streams," wrote the Psalmist, so my soul longs for you my God (Psalm 42.1)." Yearning to do God's will is fueled by our feelings of love and desire. Our feelings of love and desire are fueled by our communication with God. In the midst of such conversations we learn what God wants to do in our life and in the lives of others. Most notably, God wants to bring healing into the world.

Prayer, then, brings about a two-way conversation. It brings the words that our mind heard during the first two steps into the heart. Bringing the mind into the heart means bringing the words of God into the innermost core of ourselves. Thus, we link our heart to God. This will evoke a response from the deepest part of our inner being. Our response may include wonder, regret, surrender, and other feelings that will culminate in a yearning to be in relationship with God.

Contemplating the Word

The transition to contemplation is a result of moving further away from the experiences of thinking and talking and into the areas of feeling, sensing, loving, and intuiting. Prayer becomes a transforming power that helps us to ground ourselves in the present and to stay there. Doing so allows us to sharpen our awareness of ourselves in relationship to God, our neighbors, and ourselves.

The opposite is deadening our awareness that can come from an attempt to deliberately create a silence and stillness to rest in. Stillness and silence is not a quest. It is a result of an awareness of what God wants and our surrender to a divine embrace that will allow us to realize that awareness does not bring knowledge but brings transformation.

Thus, contemplation begins with calm acceptance of the transforming embrace of God. Transformation is needed because, if we meant what we prayed, God will penetrate our hearts with love. Such love, however, opens us up to the brokenness of all creation. It is at this point that we begin to feel that we have gone beyond the words of our texts and into a union with the divine Word.

Compassion and Action

To enter into union with the divine Word, Christ, is to enter into the hurts and pains of others. We often read that we are to be like Christ. To be like Christ is to embrace the brokenness of our world. This is the Christ who was born in a stable, died between two thieves, and rose from the dead out of a stranger's tomb. This

is also the same Christ who “emptied” himself in order to assume our full humanity with all its weaknesses. As noted in the New Testament:

“Though he was in the form of God, (he) did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on the cross” (Philippians 2. 6-8).

This “emptying” was for our sake, that he might more fully identify with us so that we could identify with him.

To be Christ-like is to be compassionate. There are three linguistic expressions of compassion that underline what it means to be compassionate. The Latin root words literally describe compassion as “suffering together with another”. The Greek root words literally describe compassion as “a wrenching of one’s guts”. The Hebrew root words literally describe compassion as “a powerful emotion of birth that yields personal and societal transformation”

Therefore, being compassionate means to enter into the deep wounded heart of the world. This means to identify with the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, the homeless, the dying, the exploited, the oppressed all whom God identifies with. However, when we open ourselves to the hurts and pains of the world, we inevitably open ourselves to our own hurts and pains as well. Too often, we have experienced brokenness in our own lives and are in need of the transforming embrace of God.

Once we have reached this point, we are at the threshold of action. One step of action could be to begin to avoid our own hurts and pains by avoiding the hurts and pains of others. The other step of action allows God to transform our pain by using us to heal the pain of others.

Conclusion

The first step of lectio divina began with reading the word and now ends with an astonishing intimacy with God. There is nothing left but to move to action—action that will bring healing to others and ourselves. This means that we need to let others see what we see, hear what we hear, feel what we feel, and be transformed as we are by a loving embrace that causes us to keep coming back to the practice of lectio divina again and again.