

SEVEN PRINCIPLES OF LECTIO DIVINA

By Michael Casey OSCO

Experience confirms that the most ordinary cause of "dryness" or "staleness" in prayer is a defect in genuine spiritual reading. Without consistent intake of the Word of God, prayer never comes naturally and interest in prayer declines. On the other hand, the first step in any program to revitalize the practice of prayer is always a renewed contact with God's Word.

However, many people continue to experience such dryness even though they do devote regular periods to spiritual reading. This is usually due to the fact that the reading is not done in such a way as to provoke prayer. If no distinction is made between the manner in which one approaches lectio divina and the way in which one's ordinary professional or leisure reading is done, then prayer will not easily follow. Lectio divina is not simply a matter of reading books about the spiritual life, theology, or the Bible. Lectio divina is chiefly distinguished from other reading by the way in which it is done. Even the most suitable material can fail to yield results if approached in the wrong way.

This article is intended to recall the most fundamental differences between genuine lectio divina and other forms of reading.

PRINCIPLE 1: Lectio divina is aimed not at confirming and reinforcing our individual approach to life, but at breaking into our subjective world and enriching it from the outside, delivering us from the prejudices and limitations of closed convictions and ideology and exposing our lives to the fullness of revelation and not simply to that part which presently appeals to us.

Historically, the expression "lectio divina" was first used in connection with the proclamation of the Scriptures in the liturgy. When people were less literate, and books were rarer, more reliance was placed on public reading as the means of daily renewal. The drawbacks of such a system are obvious, but there was one advantage. The reading was outside the individual's choice; there was always an element of unpredictability. This meant that the Christian was forced to adapt his thinking to suit the reading, rather than model his choice of reading on his personal preference at a given moment. In this way there was a possibility of real

dialogue between the Word and the person. In opening his life to such reading the person was giving God *carte blanche*. On the one hand, this meant that any comfort or consolation received in the course of such reading was the stronger for being unsolicited. On the other hand, the possibility was left open for one's life and values to be subjected to the saving judgment of God's Word. In all our *lectio divina* we must be prepared to be surprised. This is why it is important that our intake be somewhat fluid. Reading only familiar passages from the Scriptures and other "old favourites" is like owning a tape-recorder but having no radio. It has the convenience of being able to provide something to suit each mood as it comes along, but it has no power to cater for our developing range of moods and needs. The danger is that we grow weary of what used to be so apt and have nothing with which to replace it. Our reading should always have some element of adventure about it; it should not be static or stale.

Insofar as *lectio divina* is a means by which we progress toward the fullness of revealed truth and leave behind the narrow limits of our subjective world, it is a significant factor in our communion with the church. Since most disunity is a result of partial views of the truth rather than from positive untruth, it follows that harmony among Christians is powerfully helped by a search for the whole truth. This is why it is important for us to expose ourselves to something broader than the type of reading dictated by our immediate needs. There is much to be said of a certain objectivity in our choice of reading.

Ecclesial writings form the best basis of genuine *lectio divina*. The Bible has first claim on our attention. But it is a great mistake for us to limit ourselves to the Scriptures. Throughout the centuries there have been many other works which have been of considerable assistance to Christians in their efforts to put the Scriptures into practice. Having rediscovered the Bible, it is time for our generation to renew contact with the great spiritual masters of antiquity. Notwithstanding the cultural difficulties inherent in understanding these ancient authors, almost any effort we make in this direction is a source of ample enrichment for our lives as Christians. Finally, must be mentioned among ecclesial writings, the official documents of the church, conciliar decrees, encyclicals, and so forth.

PRINCIPLE 2: Lectio divina is a long-term activity. It is not a source of immediate gratification as much as general provisioning for/life. Fidelity and constancy are most valuable extras to such reading.

It is wrong to think of lectio divina as being like a quick trip to the refrigerator for a snack when one feels a little hungry. It is more like the regular meals which constitute life's basic source of energy. It is quite important that we are convinced that it is impossible for us to remain genuine followers of Christ without continued contact with his Word. Our own feelings of need are not always an accurate gauge in this respect; our effectiveness in conveying Christ to others is voiced long before we ourselves begin to decay. The fact is that to the extent that we are involved in apostolic activity we must be prepared to carry excess baggage. We cannot transmit to others what we ourselves have never learned.

Lectio divina is not always thrilling; sometimes it severely taxes our sense of dedication. But it is always obligatory. If we find ourselves regularly spending less than two or three hours per week in free, personal contact with God's Word we can, in most cases, expect trouble. To excuse ourselves from this minimum is to step off the common way and it would be prudent for us to consult with a plain-speaking director.

PRINCIPLE 3: Lectio divina is connected with our personal sense of vocation. The aim of our reading is to hear the call of God dearly and concretely/in our present situation.

Lectio divina is never part of a program of self-improvement. It is a response to an invitation. The first fidelity required of a disciple is that he be open to accept guidance and concrete directives from his master. By exposing himself fully to his master's influence the disciple becomes imbued with his attitudes and values and is progressively aware of how to shape his life. In lectio divina we give God a chance to get at us, to guide us, to teach us, maybe to call into question some of our bright ideas and pet projects. Turning aside, for the moment, from our own beliefs and plans we concentrate on being responsive to God's call. We go to our reading in a spirit of submission, prepared patiently to cede the initiative to Christ.

The trust, reverence, and submission necessary for true lectio divina points to the necessity of care in our choice of readings. It is imprudent to credit everything that is published with total reliability. The books we use for lectio divina must be substantial enough to sustain our reverence. They must be for us an opening out into the whole truth, not a closing in on part of that truth. If we have books we can trust, we can afford to relax our critical faculties and allow God's Word to speak to our hearts.

PRINCIPLE 4: Lectio divina applies the Word of God to our own life-situation, allowing revelation and experience to overlap.

The Holy Spirit, who sustains faith in the church, is active not only in the expression and recording of revealed truth. He makes his presence felt also in the reading and reception of what has been written. Through our reading, the Spirit intends to renew our lives, to reshape them according to God's plan. Because this is so, it is important that our lectio divina be done not in isolation from real life, from our past and present, our joys and sorrows, our pluses and minuses. The Word of God speaks to us in the here-and-now, as we are. It has now no interest in what we used to be or what we might have been.

We do not read in order to garner information. Most of us have probably already acquired sufficient brute facts to last us through several lifetimes. The purpose of lectio divina is to allow us to interpret our experience of life with all its ups and downs in the light of God's Word in the faith of the church. It is not a question of opting out of life, for example, by pretending that our problems do not exist. Lectio divina involves accepting the incredible truth that God speaks to me only as I am. It is most important that in my reading I leave aside all fantasy and playacting and be myself. It is only the discovery of our native neediness that motivates us to seek from God power to rise above it. It is only when our search for light and strength in the Scriptures is imbued with a certain urgency that success is in sight. If our reading lacks seriousness and depth and is merely a dabbler's hobby, nothing permanent will result from it.

PRINCIPLE 5: There Is a certain purposelessness or gratuity about lectio divina which Is reflected in the leisure and peace which surround it Lectio divina is done in such a way that it maybe punctuated by prayer.

Central to the very notion of lectio divina is its lack of utilitarian value or purpose. It is possessed of a certain freedom, or vacation, which comes from having nothing particular to achieve. There is a place for useful spiritual activities which include reading about the spiritual life, studying theology, and working with the Sacred Books. Sermons have to be prepared and religious instructions planned. None of these useful activities, however, is lectio divina. Beyond the religious tasks imposed on an individual which may involve activity in the same area as lectio divina, time must be left for a leisurely reading which leaves room for God's grace to impact and which is more like prayer than work.

Quiet and stillness invest reading with an atmosphere of mellowness. Prayer thrives in such a climate. When, during lectio divina, prayer comes naturally, it should not be elbowed aside but allowed to spread. When one's heart is inflamed or one's interest captivated, no pressure should be felt to keep moving. In lectio divina the "interruptions" are habitually more important than the reading itself. Having allowed God's Word entrance into our hearts we should extend to it also the possibility of moving without restriction and of exercising its influence over us without stoppage or hindrance. For this to happen, any form of pressure must be eschewed.

PRINCIPLE 6: Reading is not merely an 'inner" exercise. As far as possible our whole body should participate in our lectio divina.

When we are engaged in lectio divina our whole person should be involved in this quiet opening to God's Word. Some attention to posture is necessary to ensure that we are at once relaxed and disciplined. It often helps, if we are the sort of people who are professionally involved in much reading, to have a particular posture for our lectio divina (e.g., away from our desk or even on the floor) that we do not employ for other activities. If we are alone, we should begin our reading with a deliberate Sign of the Cross or something similar to remind ourselves what we are about. In antiquity, reading always meant reading aloud; it was far from the rapid eye-scanning that we associate with the term. Even for us moderns there is a certain value in mouthing the words as we read. It has the effect of slowing down the reading and of rendering it more deliberate. By more

completely involving ourselves in what we are reading, the text becomes richer for us and, to the extent that such bodily participation keeps us busier, it acts as an effective block to distractions. So long as we avoid turning our lectio divina into an exercise in amateur dramatics, reading aloud can be a valuable aid in giving more impact and feeling to our contact with the Word of God. And it will certainly slow us down.

PRINCIPLE 7: When something is encountered in our lectio divina which particularly speaks to us we should endeavour to retain it in our memory lest any of its savour escape us.

From time-to-time in our reading we come across something which specially appeals to us or which seems to apply very aptly to our particular situation at a given moment. We should make the most of such opportunities and spend as much time with the text in question as we can. If it helps, we can write it out and keep it before us for a few days, allowing ourselves the leisure to ruminate upon it and really let it become part of us. If it is something particularly attractive to us and is fairly short, we can use it as the basis of our prayer. When occasion presents itself for brief or even momentary prayer during the day, we should take this as our starting point. In this way we are trying to give full scope to a text which the attraction of grace has signalled to us as being of special relevance. When the attraction fades, we should pass on to something else without regret.

Our lectio divina should be conducted in such a way that we develop a sensitivity to the call of grace. In the beginning the texts which cause us to come alive will usually be of a confirmatory nature. As our sensitivity increases other texts will begin to clamour for our attention, texts which offer challenge rather than comfort. To these also we must learn to submit, knowing that it is in this way that God renews our life.

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