

APPENDIX

PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR *LECTIO DIVINA*

*"The Scripture is neither closed such that it is discouraging, nor accessible such that it becomes banal. The more we frequent it, the less we grow tired of it, the more we meditate on it, the more we love it."*¹

I want to offer some advice for practicing *lectio divina*. We have seen earlier how necessary it is that our hearts embrace the Word of God. This happens first and foremost in the liturgical assembly, when the Holy Scriptures are proclaimed and commented on. But it remains necessary that each of us take moments to listen to the Word of God and be "called, oriented, and fashioned" by it, in the words of Pope John Paul II.

The suggestions that follow should be put into practice very freely and flexibly. Everyone needs to discover for himself the best way of integrating the reading of Scripture into his life.

¹St. Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job*, XX, 1,1. Cited in an address of Pope John Paul II on October 20, 1997, the day after he proclaimed of St. Thérèse of Lisieux a doctor of the Church.

To the extent possible, some time should be dedicated to prayerful reading of the Word, thus continuing the rich monastic tradition of *lectio divina*. This is not continuous reading of the Bible, a chapter a day perhaps, with the aim of getting through as much of it as possible. Nor is it time spent in Bible study and exegesis. People with the opportunity will find it very beneficial to study the Bible using a variety of tools: courses, the study of biblical languages, dictionaries, concordances, commentaries, and various techniques for interpreting the text (historical, archeological, semiotic).

Such studies can be a support for *lectio divina*, but *lectio* itself is something different. It is meditative reading of the Scriptures done with simplicity, prayer, and faith, with a goal of hearing what the Lord wants to say to one today in order to be enlightened and transformed by it.

What is crucial in this enterprise is not how much one knows but the attitude of one's heart—an attitude of thirst for God, confidence that he wants to speak to one, and a great desire for conversion. Here is the great secret of *lectio*. Reading Scripture will be far more fruitful for one in whom the desire of conversion is strong. Many simple, unlettered people have received great light and powerful encouragement from Holy Scripture because they were confident in encountering the living Word of God. St. Thérèse herself is one of many examples.

Much of the advice that applies to prayer applies also to *lectio divina*: the importance of perseverance, accepting arid periods, the fundamental role of faith and hope, etc. Indeed, *lectio divina* is the most ancient, most universal, and most practiced of all the “methods of prayer.”² Done in the manner to be described, it is the best entry into a life of prayer. Here, then, are recommendations.

WHAT TIME IS BEST?

If you can, it is good to take time every day to meditate on the Word. Busy as we are, we find time daily to nourish our bodies, so why not our souls? Ideally, morning is best, for then our spirits are most fresh and best disposed, not yet burdened by the accumulated worries of the day. Psalm 90 says: “Satisfy us in the morning with thy steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Ps 90:14). And Isaiah: “Morning by morning he wakens my ear to hear” (Is 50:4).

To do *lectio divina* in the morning testifies that the most important thing in one's life is to heed God. *Lectio* places one in an attitude of listening extending through

²I use the word prayer here in the sense that it has taken in Western tradition since the sixteenth century: silent personal prayer, practiced regularly for a determined time, whose goal is to make us enter into communion with God and unite us to him. See my work: *Time for God, A Guide to Mental Prayer* (Scepter Publishers, Inc., 2008).

the course of the day. That said, it is clear that many people cannot take time in the morning and must find other moments for them. If they thirst for God, he can speak with him just the same.

How long? A quarter of an hour at least. A half-hour or forty-five minutes is better.

WHAT TEXT TO MEDITATE ON?

The possibilities are many. One can meditate for days on a particular text—one of the gospels, a letter of Paul, or something else. I know a married man, the father of a family, who takes time to pray with the Word of God every day. He has stayed with the Gospel of John for two or three years.

Still, my advice to beginners is to use the texts chosen by the Church for the Mass of the day. This has the advantage of joining us with the universal Church and its liturgical calendar and preparing us for the Eucharist if we participate in it that day. Moreover, in this way three well-chosen texts are available to us (first reading, psalm, Gospel), so that there is less chance of having to wrestle with something too dry or too difficult. Practicing *lectio* by immersing oneself simultaneously in several texts also enables one to see the profound unity of the Scriptures. It is a great joy to discover how scripture texts very different by style, era, or composition complement one another.

When interpreting Scripture, sages of rabbinic tradition love to make the richness of the texts leap out by “stringing necklaces.” The pearls are verses from different parts of Scripture—the Torah, the Prophets, the Psalms, and wisdom writings. Jesus did the same after the Resurrection for the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:27 and 24:44). This tradition of drawing together different texts that shed light on one another was followed by the Fathers of the Church and is practiced by spiritual writers up to this day.

HOW TO PROCEED IN A CONCRETE WAY

As has been emphasized, the profit to be drawn from *lectio divina* has more to do with interior dispositions than technique. One should not launch directly into reading, but should allow time to get ready by adopting a prayerful disposition of faith and desire for God. Here are some steps.

1. As with any time of prayer, it is best to draw back and place oneself in God’s presence. Set aside worries and distractions. As Mary of Bethany knew, what is necessary is to put oneself at the feet of the Lord and listen to his word.³ This means situating oneself in the present moment, something that is

³ Cf. the story of Martha and Mary, Lk 10:38–42.

sometimes quite difficult to do. Turning to the body and its sensations may help. The body has its shortcomings, but it has an advantage over thought in being always in the present, while thoughts often flit back and forth between the past and the future. God is encountered only in the present moment, and the body and its sensations help situate a person there. Often, then, bodily preparation should come before reading: closing one's eyes, relaxing (flex the shoulders and other muscles that may be tense), breathe slowly but deeply, be aware of the body's contact with its surroundings—the ground beneath one's feet, the seat one occupies, the table one's arms rest upon, the hands holding the Bible or other book to be read. The first contact with the Word must be physical. Touching is already a sort of listening. Does not St. John say: "*What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we looked upon and touched with our hands concerns the Word of life*" (1 Jn 1:1)?

2. Once sufficiently relaxed, in contact with the body and situated in the present moment, one must turn one's heart toward God, thanking him for this moment in which he will join one by his Word, asking him to open one's mind to understand the Scriptures as he opened the minds of his disciples (Lk 24:44). Especially he should be asked to convert

one's heart, condemn sinful compromises, enlighten and transform one to be more responsive to his divine project for one's life.

3. Take as long as necessary to be well-disposed, for it is essential. Then open your eyes and begin to read. Read slowly, applying the intelligence and the heart to what is read and meditating on it.

"Meditate," in the biblical tradition, signifies not so much reflecting as repeating and ruminating. It is more physical than intellectual at first. Do not hesitate to repeat a passage many times, since this often is how what God wishes to say by it today will emerge. Reflective intelligence obviously has a role to play. One can question the text: What does it say about God? About myself? What good news does it contain? What invitation? If a verse seems obscure, the use of notes or a commentary may help—but be careful not to turn *lectio* into intellectual study.

Feel free to spend time on a verse that takes on a particular significance for you. Dialogue with God about it. This kind of reading is meant to become prayer. Give thanks for a passage that encourages, ask God's help for one that summons to a difficult conversion, etc. At certain moments, if the grace is given, stop reading and pause in a more contemplative attitude of prayer that may be simple admiration of the beauty that God has made us find in the

text: his sweetness, his majesty, his faithfulness, the splendor of what he did in Christ, and invite one simply to contemplate that and give thanks. The ultimate goal of *lectio* is not to cover vast quantities of text, but to introduce us to this attitude of contemplative awe that deeply nourishes faith, hope, and love. It is not always granted, but when it is, stop the reading and be content with the simple, loving presence of the mystery the text has unveiled.

What has just been said covers the four stages of *lectio divina* according to the tradition of the Middle Ages: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation). They do not necessarily occur in sequence, but are particular modes of experience. The first three depend on human activity, but the fourth is a gift of grace. We must desire it and welcome it, but it is not always given to us. Moreover, as I have said, there can be times of aridity, of dryness, as in any prayer. Never be discouraged. What is sought will be found in the end.

While meditating, it is good to make written notes about words that touch us particularly. Use a notebook for this purpose. Writing helps make the Word penetrate more deeply into one's heart and memory.

Once the time for *lectio* is up, thank the Lord for the moments spent with him, and ask him for grace

to keep the Word in your heart, as the Virgin Mary did, and to put into practice the enlightenment received in meditation.

I want to conclude with a beautiful passage of Matta el-Maskin, the contemporary Egyptian monk who has fostered a magnificent spiritual renewal in Coptic monasticism.

Meditation is not simply vocal reading in depth, it also means silent repetition of the Word numerous times, with an ever-growing deepening until the heart is embraced by divine fire. That is illustrated by what David said in Psalm 39: "*My heart smoldered within me. In my thoughts a fire blazed up.*" Here the secret line appears that links practice and effort to grace and divine fire. The mere fact of meditating several times on the Word of God, slowly and tranquilly, will build, through the mercy of God and his grace, to the embrace of the heart! Thus, meditation becomes the first, normal link between sincere effort at prayer and the gifts of God and his ineffable grace. For this reason, meditation has been considered the first and most important of the heart's degrees of prayer, from which mankind can lift itself to the fervor of the Spirit, and live there as long as life lasts.⁴

⁴Matta El Maskin, *The Experience of God in the Life of Prayer* (Cetf), 48.