



“TAKE AND READ” (THE PRACTICE OF *LECTIO DIVINA*)

“Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”

– St. Jerome

Pope St. John Paul II constantly stressed in his teachings that with the massive secularist ideology currently engulfing the West, the Christian life must be lived intensely or it will not be lived at all. Christians are not called to be “ordinary” but heroic and therefore combat what the Servant of God Archbishop Fulton Sheen referred to as the “nemesis of mediocrity.” In order to live this “heroic” Christian life, one must be nourished with the Scriptures. With that in mind let us look at one of the pillars of the monastic life — that of *Lectio Divina* or Sacred Reading. While originating in monasticism, it’s a practice that any Christian can embrace to enhance and strengthen their spiritual lives.

The origins of this discipline go back to the Desert Fathers and Mothers. These Christians sought the desert because while the persecutions against the Church had ceased by this time (early 4th Century), they still had to face the great danger that confronts Christians even to this day, namely, to live in the world without compromise. They sought to imitate Jesus Christ by living a life of unceasing prayer and penance in the silence of solitude for the praise of God and for the salvation of the world. In order to lead this life they needed to be nourished by the Scriptures so they devoted a large amount of time each day to the practice of a slow and prayerful reading of the

Scriptures. This enabled them to converse with God and strengthened them in the penitential life they had embraced. When individuals sought them out for spiritual counsel they would give them a “Good Word” based on the Scriptures.

With the advent of cenobitic monasticism (monks and nuns who come to live together in community within a monastic setting) under St. Augustine and St. Benedict, *lectio divina* becomes an essential element in the monastic life. The Rule of St. Benedict devotes several hours each day to this important practice. Usually after the celebration of Lauds (Morning Prayer) the monk would spend time in *lectio* so that during the rest of the day he could recall Scripture passages which would form the basis for the practice of short continuous prayers throughout the day. Favorite passages would be memorized and recalled during the daily manual labor so that the monk worked in the presence of God. On Sundays and feast days (e.g. Holy Days of Obligation) when there was no manual labor, St. Benedict mandated that this time be used specifically for *lectio divina*. *Lectio Divina* along with Liturgical Prayer and Manual Labor thus became the tripod supporting monastic life. With this introduction we now go into the nuts and bolts of *lectio divina*.

Firstly, we must understand how **different** *lectio* is from

our current ways of reading. We tend to read today primarily to gain information which we can then put to use (e.g., news, stock market quotations, sports reports, etc.) Also with the Internet and the increased practice of “texting”, fewer and fewer take the time to leisurely read through a book so that reading itself is becoming a lost art.

Lectio instead involves the slow meditative reading of the Scriptures. The Desert Fathers and Mothers often used the example of the cow chewing the cud — which is a slow drawn out process — as the way one should read the Scriptures. Getting information does not constitute the purpose of *Lectio* but rather entering into communion with God through His holy Word. When the monastics instituted *Lectio* (before the printing press) books were both rare and expensive (all were handwritten). You could not go through a book quickly in order to go to a new one: no speed reading here. Since few books were available, the monk took his time reading and re-reading so that he literally absorbed what he read as our bodies absorb the food we eat. So with the understanding that *Lectio* differs from our usual ways of reading, we’ll look at a scenario for this practice.

First, it’s important to have a good Bible translation: one that’s faithful to the text easy to understand and free of ideological editing. The RSV Catholic version — first or second editions — is an excellent choice (you might also consider a large or giant print version which helps greatly with *lectio*).

Second, leave aside the commentaries for now. They have an important purpose but they don’t constitute real *lectio*. Remember, getting “information” is not what *lectio* is about.

Try to devote a set period of time each day for this practice. A set time encourages faithfulness to the practice and have a place which is quiet and free of distractions (on good weather days monks would often take their bibles and sit under a nice tree. Also a special room in the monastery called the “Scriptorium” was set aside for *lectio*).

As for *lectio* material you can choose a book of the Bible or take the Scripture readings of the daily Mass (e.g., the Hermits of Bethlehem have the practice of prayerfully reading the Mass readings of the day and from them formulate a petition to be prayed for at the Prayers of the Faithful during Mass). By doing this and attending Holy Mass each day, you will greatly nourish your spiritual life by receiving the “Bread of the Word” and the “Bread of

Life” (Holy Communion).

A good place to start would be one of the Gospels or the Letters of St. Paul. It’s important to read the book in its entirety. This helps the Word of God to confront us as it should. By staying with a book in its entirety, or by using the Mass readings of the day, the choice of the text lies somewhat out of our control. As one monk puts it, “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*.”

Note again the monastic image of the cow chewing the cud. We read the text slowly. The early monks would often slowly read the passage aloud so as to hear the reading and assimilate it more. In our therapeutic culture reading aloud to oneself often gets equated with some form of mental imbalance but the monks would do this to engage their whole bodies in the process. We worship God with mind **and** body.

When some particular passage strikes us, we pause and ponder it (chew the cud). What is God telling me here? How does this fit into my life situation? Do I have to make some changes or adjustments in my life? We stay with this as long as the inspiration lasts, then continue with the text. With this inspiration we can then formulate a prayer asking the Lord’s grace to carry out what He seems to be telling me here. *Lectio* is connected with our personal sense of vocation. The aim of our reading is to hear the call of God clearly and concretely in our present situation.

Because this is God’s Word, it has the power to change us and to live heroically the Christian life today. Without steady exposure to God’s Word, the Christian life is impossible to live: especially in these times of literally diabolic assault. St. Benedict was convinced that if a monk experienced problems in his monastic life, a neglect of *lectio* was often the reason.

This article doesn’t purport to be a scientific treatise on the practice of *lectio*. Many good publications and pamphlets exist giving a more thorough treatment of it. Hopefully this one will whet the appetite and inspire an interest in this most ancient but so relevant practice.

