

# **LECTIO DIVINA**

**The Missionary's typical prayer**

**Fr. Joe Vieira**

- who appears in the text?
- what are they saying?
- why are they saying what they say?
- what they are saying is telling me anything also to my life?
- ...

#### Step 4. Pray

*"If the text is a prayer, you pray. If the text is thanksgiving, you rejoice. If the text is full of hope, have hope; if it expresses fear, you fear.*

*The things you feel in the text, they are a mirror of yourselves."* (St. Augustine)

In the reading I listened... Here in prayer I answer to what I listened.



#### Step 5. Remain in the Word

Like Mary. Revolve those things we read and learned throughout the day...

*"If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples" (Jo. 8, 31)*

We can end with a small prayer in which we ask the Lord to help us to put into practice in

our daily life all that we listened, read, meditated and learned in prayer.

# Lectio Divina: Main Simple Steps

## Step 1. Invoke the Holy Spirit

Without the Holy Spirit, the bible is just any other book. It's like a body without soul, when the heart stops it becomes a corpse. Likewise with the Bible: without the Holy Spirit this Word it will be a dead word for me..



## Step 2. Read

I read the text attentively: "Whoever listens, without attention, is as much guilty as the one who is guilty of not handling the Eucharist properly leaving it

to fall down." (Cesary of Arles)

In the reading, God dialogues with his people. In the biblical reading God dialogues with me.

"They shall all be taught by God." (Jo. 6,45)

Through the Lectio Divina I become a *Theodidacta* (Clement of Alexandria)

## Step 3. Meditate

This is the moment we allow ourselves to be screened and judged by the Word. I allow that the Word enlightens my life.

I question the text:



I have been growing into the conviction that lectio divina should be the typical form of a missionary's daily prayer.

The reason is obvious: we are called to proclaim the Word. Either we proclaim what we experience or we become marketers of an ideology, mercenaries of a chimera.

We can take inspiration from the opening statement of John's first letter: "Something which has existed since the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our own eyes, which we have watched and touched with our own hands, the Word of life -- this is our theme. That life was made visible; we saw it and are giving our testimony, declaring to you the eternal life, which was present to the Father and has been revealed to us. We are declaring to you what we have seen and heard, so that you too may share our life. Our life is shared with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1: 1-3).

This quote reveals us two key aspects of our mission.

1. To be missionaries we have to be intimate with the Word, we have to keep a deep personal relationship with the Word. Using Jesus' words, we have to remain with the Word (Jn 15) so that the Word can dwell, pitch his tent within our hearts.

Lectio divina as a method of prayer helps us to enter into this intimacy with Jesus, for the Word to incarnate into today's world through us, to incarnate with us and in us.

The Gospels say people were flocking around Jesus because he taught with authority: "his teaching made a deep impression on them because, unlike the scribes, he taught them with authority" (Mk 1:22). I believe that Jesus' authority came from his method of sharing with people his experience of God as Abba, daddy. This was a real breakthrough. People were used to hear preachers and rabbis to lean on the authority of their masters. This is Jesus' true revolution: He gave an independent view of God, the Abba he experienced in his long nights of solitude in the Galilean hills.

2. Mission is sharing. We share with people our life, our ex-

perience of Jesus so that they may have also life in full (Jn 10:10). This sharing can take many expressions and forms but it remains a sharing. We did not come this far to save anyone. That is God's gift. We came to share the reasons of our hope with respect: "Simply proclaim the Lord Christ holy in your hearts, and always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you have. But give it with courtesy and respect and with a clear conscience, so that those who slander your good behaviour in Christ may be ashamed of their accusations" (1 Pt 3: 15-16).

## HISTORY

Lectio divina is an ancient slow contemplative method or technique of prayer with the Word of God perfected and practiced by monks and nuns. It means divine reading or spiritual reading.

Through a quick Google browsing I discovered that the principles of lectio divina were expressed around the year A.D. 220 and practiced by monks, especially the monastic rules of Pachomius, Augustine, Basil, and Benedict. Lectio divina was also practiced by lay people. It is a dynamic method with four principles or steps: Lectio – Reading, Meditatio – Meditation, Oratio – Prayer, and Contemplatio – Contemplation. Pope Benedict added a plus one: Actio – Action.

## POPE BENEDICT'S POSITION

The Pope wrote extensively about lectio divina in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* under the title *The prayerful reading of sacred Scripture* and "lectio divina" (86-87).

Benedict XVI says "the Synod frequently insisted on the need for a prayerful approach to the sacred text as a fundamental element in the spiritual life of every believer, in the various ministries and states in life, with particular reference to lectio divina."

He says the word of God is at the basis of all authentic Christian spirituality and quotes St. Saint Augustine: "Your prayer is the word you speak to God. When you read the Bible, God speaks to you; when you pray, you speak to God".

In this way prayer is a true dialogue: a meeting of words. Διὰ means

pletely exhausted and needed a holiday to recover from awesome eight days I spent by a lake allowing myself to be guided into this inner journey and free myself from the shell I built around me to be secure and retire to when threatened by whatever or whoever!

Finally, lectio divina is above all an experience of God's maternity and tenderness: "I hold myself in quiet and silence, like a little child in its mother's arms, like a little child, so I keep myself" (Ps 131: 2). The stillness and bliss of lectio divina allows us to enter into this dimension of close and intimate encounter with God.

While praying the Scriptures using the lectio divina method we allow ourselves to be cradled or rocked by God. This method is not so much about discovering new meanings, preparing new discourses but feeling God's presence within us. So the basic question to approach this method of prayer is not so much what I discover, what I know, but WHAT I FEEL vis-a-vis with God's Word in silence and peace.

To practice: read the prologue of John's Gospel – Jn 1: 1-18

Juba, December 18, 2010

Fr. Joe Vieira mccj

## MY EXPERIENCE

I have been using *lectio divina* in two ways: as a continuous reading of the Bible and as a way to prepare the liturgy.

In Ethiopia I managed to read the Old Testament in this way and part of the New. It was a long process – over three years, but it was very rich too. I used to pray at the end of the day when silence was very rich in the church.

The *lectio divina* as a method to prepare the liturgy is very effective. When I was a young priest I went to great lengths to prepare the Sunday homilies. And the preaching was some kind of a lecture. Slowly I started reading the Sunday texts in the dynamics of the four steps without being bothered with the contents to deliver to the people of God. And the homilies became more focused and deeper, they shifted from a lesson on the texts to the sharing of what God told me. In this process I am greatly helped by the Gospel sharing we do weekly around the Sunday Gospel. Each one of us has a different insight that lends a broader meaning to the text.

The Gospel sharing method proposed by Lumko – the famous seven steps – is based on the *lectio divina* experience and it is a wonderful pastoral tool. We introduced it in Haro Wato Mission, South Ethiopia, to counter the Protestant attitude that the Bible was a book to know inside out. The Bible was more than a source of debate and knowledge, it was the living Word of God, a space of encounter and prayer. People would meet in different huts after Sunday Mass to pray the Sunday Gospel following the seven-step method. We the missionaries were present, but not as leaders. The prayer always ended with some shared food.

However, the strongest experience I made of *lectio divina* - of using the Word as a means of union with God – were the directed spiritual exercises. It is amazing what can happen to us if we give time and space to God and listen to him while listening to ourselves. To spend a day ruminating a word, a phrase, feeling it alive and challenging, operating some kind of inner revolution. The first time I did it – after some of my friends insisted with me to give it a try – I was com-

through, across.

Pope Benedict recalled also Origen who wrote in his Letter to Gregory: “Devote yourself to the *lectio* of the divine Scriptures; apply yourself to this with perseverance. Do your reading with the intent of believing in and pleasing God. If during the *lectio* you encounter a closed door, knock and it will be opened to you by that guardian of whom Jesus said, ‘The gatekeeper will open it for him’. By applying yourself in this way to *lectio divina*, search diligently and with unshakable trust in God for the meaning of the divine Scriptures, which is hidden in great fullness within. You ought not, however, to be satisfied merely with knocking and seeking: to understand the things of God, what is absolutely necessary is *oratio*. For this reason, the Saviour told us not only: ‘Seek and you will find’, and ‘Knock and it shall be opened to you’, but also added, ‘Ask and you shall receive.’”

The Pope alerts for the risk of an individualistic approach to the Scriptures saying “God’s word is given to us precisely to build communion, to unite us in the Truth along our path to God” while advocating for a communal reading of Scripture to experience sacred Scripture in communion with the Church.

The Pontiff goes further noting that the privileged place for the prayerful reading of sacred Scripture is the liturgy, and particularly the Eucharist.

I guess he is trying to counter the Protestant mentality of *Sola scriptura* and the individual interpretation of the Texts. But I do not see why the *Scriptura* cannot stand on its own feet and of its right apart from the Eucharist and the sacraments. After all, *lectio divina* started as a personal means of union with God. Gospel sharing is more modern.

Pope Benedict presents his own version of the four plus one *Lectio* steps – the numbering is mine:

“I would like here to review the basic steps of this procedure.

1. It opens with the reading (*lectio*) of a text, which leads to a desire to understand its true content: what does the biblical text say

in itself? Without this, there is always a risk that the text will become a pretext for never moving beyond our own ideas.

2. Next comes meditation (*meditatio*), which asks: what does the biblical text say to us? Here, each person, individually but also as a member of the community, must let himself or herself be moved and challenged.

3. Following this comes prayer (*oratio*), which asks the question: what do we say to the Lord in response to his word? Prayer, as petition, intercession, thanksgiving and praise, is the primary way by which the word transforms us.

4. Finally, *lectio divina* concludes with contemplation (*contemplatio*), during which we take up, as a gift from God, his own way of seeing and judging reality, and ask ourselves what conversion of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of us.”

5. “We do well also to remember that the process of *lectio divina* is not concluded until it arrives at action (*actio*), which moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others in charity.”

The Pope concludes by writing that “Mary is the model of docile acceptance of God’s word, for she “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2: 19; cf. 2: 51); she discovered the profound bond which unites, in God’s great plan, apparently disparate events, actions and things.”

The Pope’s understanding of the four steps, the way he explains them, is the view of a theologian, a rationalist. A mystic, a contemplative would use a totally different terminology to express it.

Pope Benedict also speaks about the gaining of indulgence either for oneself or for the faithful departed through *Lectio Divina*, a thing I don not have a clue about.

## THE METHOD

*Lectio divina* like other forms of prayer presupposes some preparation: a moment of silencing, relaxation. One has to be comfortably seated in a quiet place and some light to help reading.

God may occasionally speak in the thunder – like in the Sinai theo-

phany, but s/he speaks most in the silence of the breeze cooling our skin, “a light murmuring sound” (1 Kg 19: 12).

There are many techniques to quieten one’s body, mind, heart and guts. I like to use rhythmic breathing while repeating a word (the mantra method) or praying a doxology a few times. Rhythm and repetition help concentration/relaxation. It can be also achieved by becoming aware of life around us listening to the many noises so that slowly all of them fade away. When one is using the readings of the liturgy, s/he can use the Psalm to prepare for the prayer by reading it slowly, prayerfully.

During this process of quietening down is also key to pay attention to the thoughts, cravings or whatever surges that populate our hearts and minds. Don’t sweep them under the carpet of fear. Name them, cherish them, owe them – they are your deepest reality and it needs to be addressed by the Word of God, exposed to his merciful gaze.

After our inner sea is laid at peace we start the four-step dynamic prayer.

*Lectio* - Reading the Bible passage gently and slowly several times, feeling each word, phrase, paragraph and listening to it until a word or a phrase sparks out.

*Meditatio* – The Word becomes God’s Word to me, now! What does this portion of the Scripture tell me? In this step I think how it applies to my own life, a very personal encounter between me and the Word. This is the phase some call rumination.

*Oratio* – It is the response to the word by opening the heart to God: a deep conversation with God that is present in the Word.

*Contemplatio* – is the moment when God speaks. The praying person frees himself or herself from whatever thoughts and listens to what God says: opening the mind, heart, and soul to the influence of God. Many times silence is the best way for this moment of deep union with God - just feeling His presence.

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