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Lectio Divina: Reading that leads us into prayer

In Chapter 48 of St. Benedict's Rule, he writes that at certain times people should be occupied in manual work and at certain times in *lectio divina*. The expression, *lectio divina*, is usually left untranslated in monastic literature, and that is just as well. It is a technical term, but it is not meant to intimidate us ordinary folks, nor give the impression of some lofty enterprise. Perhaps the best translation of the term was given by the late Abbot Bonaventure Zerr of Mt. Angel Abbey: "Lectio divina is reading God". Fr. Basil Pennington characterizes it as "a quiet receptive openness to hearing God speak through whatever media are aptly at hand . . . It is to receive the word of life and so includes written words, hearing spoken words, or seeing

ikons or whatever is expressed in creation". St. Benedict was not inventing an exclusively monastic practice, but giving witness to a common Christian custom, when he enjoined the brothers to engage in *lectio divina*.

I would like to say something about this reading that brings us to prayer. For it is different from other reading that we do in the course of the day, and yet, it is like it in some ways. Which means this "reading God" is something within our grasp. Amid the cacophony of spiritual noises in today's world, this ancient Benedictine "methodless method" has something to offer each of us. *Lectio divina* includes both the content, namely

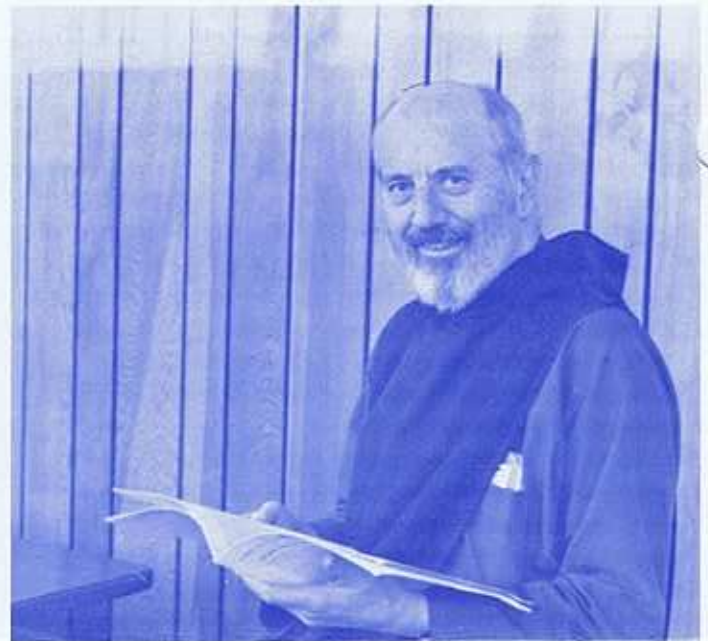
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sacred scripture and commentaries on it, and the attitude of faith in which the reading is done. I think the critical point in our day is the attitude. Since the exercise of *lectio* is to move us to prayer, what we bring to the reading may be as important as the words we read. When our attitude is one of seeking God in faith and our intention is to respond to the divine initiative - we have the basic components of what sets this reading off from other types.

We read for various reasons, not all of them consciously experienced. We read newspapers for information. This is perhaps a dangerous comparison but not only does the daily newspaper inform us of news, but it "informs" us in the sense of giving the culture and outlook of people in the community. It forms us to a way of viewing life and responding to situations common to all who read this particular paper. Our attitude plays an important role here. Is it the same towards the New York Times as it is for the National Inquirer? A healthy scepticism may be in order for both, but healthier, perhaps for the latter. A love letter may better exemplify the situation. When a biographer happens to chance upon a cache of love letters, written by his or her subject, it is like finding a lodestone. With thousands of documents, hundreds of books and a library full of archival material, none will reveal more who Harry S. Truman was as a person, than his letters, written each night he was apart from his wife Bess. The good biographer will pour over these to set each reference in place, to seek out the allusions, clarify the circumstances, capture the mood. Yet he or she will not come near the attitude of Bess, who read them first - and understood, totally, because she loved the writer.

In this essay, we are considering *lectio divina* primarily as it relates to the word of God in sacred scripture. We can be so bold as to say the written scriptures are the love letters of God to us. Commentators through the ages have poured over these words, as does a good biographer, to try to reveal the meaning, the mood, the circumstances of each word or event, so that we may know the author more fully - be moved to deeper union - be carried into a faith-response. What makes the *lectio divina* appear difficult at times, is not the scholarliness of the commentators, but our own attitude. We may take our National Inquirer scepticism toward the fact that God loves us and wants to reveal himself to us through these words and the events they portray. Or we may consider the texts of scripture merely words about past events. For Catholics especially, it is difficult to believe that God intends to be present to us in Christ through the medium of the words of scripture as well as through the sacraments. God speaks to our heart and so we are capable, under grace, of becoming present to Our Lord in a particular mystery or event of his earthly life since that reality is now present in him in his risen life. God does not intend us to be outsiders or mere spectators. "Our life is hidden with Christ in God", he had Paul write. And to St. John was confided the words of Jesus: "That they may be one as you Father in me and I in you".

We can take the attitude that the words of scripture



are about past events and not about our present life in the risen Christ and we can take the attitude that we bring to reading the National Inquirer by which we dismiss as preposterous the fact that God loves us and wants to reveal himself to us through these words and the events they portray. We can also take the attitude of Bess Truman whose faith in Harry's love enabled them to be present to each other through the written word. Or we can take the attitude of the biographer and remain a well informed spectator. But if we do *lectio* as Bess did and read and re-read the words we believe are addressed to us in love, we will have ever more access to the one who loves us, participating in his present risen life. Our response, whether verbal, non-verbal or silent is prayer. *Lectio* carried us there. Remembering what we have read, heard or seen enables us to pray always.

In Xto

J. Martin



Community News

Well, it is almost a year since our last Chronicle appeared and the weeks and months have sped by like "Fast Forward" on a cassette player. January saw us preoccupied with the triennial Visitation which is something like a regular physical checkup only it pertains to the whole community organism. The visiting "physicians" are usually abbots of other monasteries who have already had the "logs" removed from their own eyes and can therefore pick out the splinters from ours.

February found us back to normal again and showing signs of winter fatigue; however, the reception of Br. Seraphim (Ed Winslow) into the novitiate gave us all a lift and we began to "look forward with joy to Holy Easter". The Paschal Vigil is always the highlight of the year and heralds the approaching Spring and the arrival of the new lambs as well in mid April. A sudden surge of new or renewed life carried us forward into early summer there to be confronted with two surgeries in our midst. First, Brother Stephen who unexpectedly underwent abdominal surgery with great success and excellent prognosis. He made a marvelous recovery and was back to normal in about two months. Then came the total hip replacement for Brother James which had been in the works since February and which also came off smoothly. He was home in eight days time and has been making good progress throughout the summer and fall, going from crutches to a cane and finally no props at all. Meanwhile, in July, Father Martin and Brother Pierre attended the annual meeting of the Northeast Association of Monasteries at St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington D.C. These are always fruitful and encouraging encounters with others struggling for the same goals as ourselves.

A protracted dry spell from late May into mid July began to affect the food supply of our ewes and lambs on pasture requiring us to wean the lambs a month early and move them all to greener pastures. Then the rains came and relief for all concerned. But still tragedy struck as a violent storm raged and lightning killed nine ewes sheltering near a tree in one of the fields.

Necrology

John Hofbauer 12/10/87: Our monastery & Chapel are on the Hofbauer family farm.

John Reinicke 2/10/88: Son of Rogers, head of our New York oblates.

Fr. Peter Minard 6/10/88: Monk of Ligugé, he was our Novice Master from 1954-61.

Fr. Jerry McGuigan 7/23/88: Basilian priest who spent a Sabbatical here in '86.

Fr. David Looney 8/14/88: Of the Syracuse diocese, he brought many students here.

Caroline Kelly 9/27/88: Mother of our Fr. James Kelly.

Rosie Vanorio 12/4/88: She bore many physical handicaps.

Tony Nobile 12/15/88: He spent a few summers here.

In August, Hospitality Day was again celebrated, on the 14th this year. The weather was good and many friends and neighbors dropped in to say hello, listen to some dulcimer music by Glen McClure, share refreshments and conclude with Vespers of the day. As summer waned and fall prevailed, another meeting occurred this time in far away Rome and on a larger scale. Abbots & Priors from around the world assembled, our Fr. Martin among them, to exchange experiences and ideas for mutual benefit and also to elect the Abbot Primate who represents all of the confederation with the Holy See. Abbot Victor Damertz was reelected to this post.

"Back to school time" doesn't usually affect us here in late August but this year it did since we had decided to send Br. Nathan down to Catholic University for theological studies. So, he is a student again, and not an unwilling one, lodging with the hospitable monks of St. Anselm's Abbey in Washington, D.C. - Our hopes rose high as the Fall season settled in and two new postulants arrived at our door. Br. Michael Gallagher, a vigorous young man with many talents arrived from Philadelphia to become a fellow traveller with us in the Search for God and a few weeks later Fr. Peter Funk from the same city also joined us on the Way.

The colorful second week end of October was the occasion of the annual visit of our oblates from New York City, always a cheerful event. At the same time we had the Andreyev family with us, Vladislav, Olga and children. Vladislav is a painter of Russian icons at the School of Sacred Arts (NYC) and gave us two lectures with demonstrations on the theology and technique of "writing icons" in the ancient Russian tradition.

Visitation time again; this time for the Montreal Community, our adopted daughter house. Fr. Martin and Br. Pierre set off together for Canada on Monday, October 10th and arrived back on Friday. The surprise event this month was a sudden, unpredicted snow storm on the 22nd. Snow fell all day long. The trees still with their leaves in place were weighed down by the heavy burden and many branches broke off causing a power failure which lasted twenty four hours. Fortunately, our portable generator operated by Br. Pierre kept the monastery, chapel and St. Joseph's supplied with light and heat. And now we are at the end of November and the beginning of Advent or season of Hope and expectation of the great Coming of God, in Time and Eternity.



Books recommended by Fr. Martin:

A. A fuller treatment of lectio divina

Seeking the Face of God

by Msgr. William Shannon \$11.95 (cloth)

This is an excellent account of the whole phenomenon of lectio including, our response, our prayer that follows, and the activation of the contemplative dimensions of our being by God. There is a chapter on biblical words and theological terms that should be very helpful. The place of lectio divina in a social response and Gandhi's 'Truth Force' as a kind of distant mirror of the traditional force of lectio divina helps to orient the process of lectio to the contemporary world.

Too Deep for Words by Sister Thelma Hall,
a religious of the Cenacle. \$4.95

The subtitle is **Rediscovering Lectio Divina** and that is wonderfully what this accomplishes. I warmly recommend either or both these books which give lectio divina its true function in renewing the people of God.

"I Encountered God!"

The Spiritual Exercises with the Gospel of St. John

by David M. Stanley SJ

\$14 clothbound & \$11 sewn paperbound

There is a brief appendix of 16 pages that is a monograph on lectio done in masterly fashion. The book itself is an example of lectio on the various incidents of St. John's gospel. In this sense it is a valuable book for everyone although it is especially directed to people familiar with the Ignatian retreat. One should start somewhere in the middle of the book, after having read the appendix, and then read the Ignatian parts.

Scaffolding of the Spirit by Alan Ecclestone. \$9.95

This small book by an Anglican priest is an example of his lectio on the Gospel of St. John and he has arranged an appendix on reading this gospel over a three month period. The author intends us to begin again and re-read this gospel as we do the psalms. It is from England, hard to come by, and once you own it, you won't want to part with it or even loan it to a friend.

B. Bibles

There are no completely satisfactory translations. It is best to get a relatively inexpensive bible and read it rather than a coffee table display edition that is never looked at.

The New American Bible \$11.00 cloth - hardcover

This has the revised New Testament translation, the document of Vatican II on Divine Revelation, and some maps and other helps to understand the scriptures. Br. Luke can order any translation or edition you might want.

An Analysis of the Greek New Testament. \$22.00

This is Max Zerwick's Latin Analysis *Philologia Novi Testamenti Graeci* translated, revised, and adapted by Mary Grosvenor in 1981. Even those who limp badly in Greek find these close encounters with the original language near ecstasy.

Biblical Greek by Maximilian Zerwick SJ. \$13.00

The English edition by Joseph Brown SJ. We don't expect many takers on these books, but those who can take them will be very pleased.

Introductory Bibliography for the Study of Scripture

Revised edition by Joseph Fitzmyer. \$11.00

Limited readership.

C. Books that can be read in the manner of lectio divina.

Seeking God by Esther de Waal. \$4.95

This remains the best modern commentary on Benedictine spirituality and its contribution to the future of civilization.

Marked for Life \$3.50

Gateway to Hope: an exploration of failure \$4.95

The Coming of God \$9.00

These three books are by Maria Boulding, a nun of Stanbrook Abbey in England. As a guide with an earthly sense of the spiritual, there is none better.

Life Up Your Sails:

The Challenge of Living as a Christian

by Fr. Vincent Dwyer. \$14.95

The Jesuit journal *Human Development* gave this book its award of the year.

Jesus Through the Centuries

His place in the history of culture by Jaroslav Pelikan \$9.95

Pelikan should be required reading for anyone who ever studied Christology. An awareness of culture, how people respond to life and how they have expressed their humanness, is an awareness of the reservoir of meaning and value in human life and it is the field of the future.

**Sharing the Eucharistic Bread:
The Witness of the New Testament**
by Xavier Leon-Dufour SJ. \$12.95

This is a little difficult, but in terms of lectio divina the time and effort spent digging into this mine is very well rewarded.

D. Books that help apply lectio divina.

The Coming of Consolation:

How God Gets Through to Us by William Sampson SJ. \$8.95

So many books on spirituality these days focus on feeling good about one's self. Becoming convinced about God's point of view is a quite different project. The subtitle describes this book.

Shaped by the Word by M. Robert Mulholland \$7.95

Required reading for the Novices at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville and very popular with all students at the University here.

Prayer as Personal Relationship by William Barry SJ \$4.95

The author has a well deserved reputation among spiritual directors. As a recent reviewer mentioned there is a danger of reading it too fast, because it is so well done . . . and miss the depth.

Beginning to Pray by Anthony Bloom \$4.95

A classic that will always be a classic in the field of prayer. It is for square one folk which is where most of us are or need to be from time to time.

The Mystery of Christ:

The Liturgy as Spiritual Experience \$8.95

Open Mind, Open Heart \$4.95

These two books by the former Abbot of St. Joseph's Abbey in Spencer, Thomas Keating, are by a person formed in the Monastic tradition of lectio divina of which he is an outstanding guide and exemplar.

Psalms: A Biblical-Theological Commentary

by Carroll Stuhlmueller

Vol. I \$12.95 (paper) Vol. II \$10.95 (paper)

I could not say enough in favor of this small two volume work. Everything Fr. Stuhlmueller writes is worth reading.

Psalm Journal and Psalm Journal Book II

by Joan Chittister osb \$4.95 each

This is a workbook format. But this is how to start, pencil in hand.

Introduction to the Psalms

On the psalms of Compline

These pamphlets, for 25¢ each by Rev. Fr. Damasus are some of the jewels of his crown. The same is true of **The Great Sabbath Rest**.

Praying the Psalms \$6.95

Israel's Praise: Doxology Against Idolatry and Ideology \$9.95

These books are by Walter Brueggemann, a Protestant Scripture specialist, who makes the psalms come alive especially in terms of today's issues.

St. John: Gospel & Commentary by John Marsh \$8.95

St. Mark: Gospel & Commentary by Dennis Nineham \$7.95

These two pocket sized books from the Pelican Gospel Commentaries series are exceptionally well done and useful. There is an overview of the thought-unit of the gospel and then a commentary on the important words and verses within the unit. This commentary on St. John has long been my favorite, but both these splendid scripture specialists are accustomed to teaching laypersons and are very much in touch with the 20th Century.

How to Read the Old Testament \$10.95

How to Read the New Testament \$10.95

We read all sorts of 'How to' books; why not one on Scripture? The one on the Old Testament is genuinely helpful. Etienne Charpentier is the author.

How to Understand the Creed by Jean-Noel Bezancon et al \$11.95

This will certainly make the hymn of the creed at Mass and your Christian life-very much alive.

We have no end of good books. The above list was written that you might begin lectio and doing it come to the utter fullness of God.

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Yarns: Limited amounts of Oatmeal (3 ply) and Light Gray (2 and 3 ply) remain. Order now if you need them. Supplies remain in Bulky, 2 and 3 ply: Oatmeal, Heather Sand, Light Gray, Dark Gray and Natural. \$4.00 a skein plus applicable sales tax and shipping.

Pelts, wool mattress pads, bicycle seats, etc.: write for free catalog at above address.