

The Eight Stages of Lectio Divina – Building on a Tradition

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Lectio Divina is a way of reading Scripture which can be traced back through early Christian times to the Judaism of the pre-Christian era. For persons who have a strong faith in God's prior initiative in contacting them, it is a traditional way of replying. God's communication arrives for the Catholic through Scripture as it is understood in the Tradition of the Roman Church. For contemporary Catholics, this communication from God is difficult to respond to. The reasons for this are varied, but one principal reason is the increasingly triumphant media consumerism of the contemporary world: the flood of information and entertainment is so overwhelming that only a determined effort can enable a believer to make the response to God's Word which God desires.

Lectio Divina is a way of reading Scripture which has various aspects. These aspects are not to be regarded as differentiated stages, but as viewpoints of a single act which is at once simple and complex: simple, because it is basically an attempt to respond to God's Word with all my heart; complex, because it is basically an attempt to respond to God's Word with all my heart. In the concrete act of *Lectio Divina* these aspects can be distinguished from each other but not separated. As distinguished, they can be made the focal point of attention. But they all have one common essential element: *all take place in the context of faith*. The deeper the faith, the more profound the reception of God's message conveyed in the Word and the more authentic the response.

All *Lectio Divina* should be viewed as an indirect participation in the liturgy, i.e., it is connected with the worship of God.

Aspect One: Lectio (Reading). This aspect consists in the repeated reading of a passage of Scripture in order to understand the meaning which the original authors, human and divine, intended to convey. Read the text again and again. In the *Lectio* we try to understand the passage in its original context. The more specific the context, the better: historical, geographical, cultural, literary—above all, religious. In what context was the original author writing? When was he writing? Where was he writing? Under what circumstances was he writing? How does his faith manifest itself in the text? What faith response does he expect? In this aspect, commentaries can be of considerable help, though their frequent lack of explicit attention to the faith dimension must be kept in mind. The faith dimension is crucial. The faith dimension transcends the original circumscribed conditions in which the text was composed and has universal and lasting validity. Continued re-reading can help us understand this faith dimension and the religious point which is at its center. Further,

such re-reading in faith can help us place this point in the context of the entire Bible. How does the Spirit, the ultimate author of this passage and of all Scripture, want this passage to fit in to the rest of what He has inspired in the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church?

Aspect Two: Meditatio (Meditation). This aspect consists in a reflection on the lasting purpose of the text—the original religious point of the human and divine authors—that transcends the temporal and spatial limitations of the text's original setting by reason of the faith dimension. *Meditatio* seeks to know what the text says to me as a believer of today. In order to make sure that God is the One Who is speaking to me in a text I have to make sure that what seems relevant for today is linked to the original meaning. 1) *Lectio*: Original meaning. 2) *Meditatio*: Relevance of that meaning for today. What is the relevance for today of the religious point which the authors, human and divine, were making in the text in its all-important faith dimension? How am I addressed by this religious point which is communicated through a reading of the text in faith? How were the original addressees expected by God to respond? How am I expected to respond as a believing member of the Catholic Church?

Aspect Three: Oratio (Prayer). This aspect consists in a prayer that comes from the *Lectio* and from the *Meditatio*. It is a spontaneous reaction of the heart of a believer in response to a text written by a believer and addressed to believers. It is a plea for God's help for our faith in understanding what He is saying and in responding as He wishes us to respond. In this way the *Oratio* can encompass pleas for a great variety of virtues. The Spirit inspired the text with just such pleas in mind. Hence the Spirit is ready to respond to such pleas. This *Oratio* is not something that remains only internal. It is ordered ultimately also to what is external, to the way we live our faith in all the dimensions of our life.

Aspect Four: Contemplatio (Contemplation) This aspect consists in adoration, praise and silence in faith before the God Who is communicating with me. It is an attempt to stand before almighty God with my heart exposed. "Heart" here is to be understood in the Semitic sense of the center of my being, that point at which my memory, intellect, will, affections meet and where "I" am really "I". True contemplation will reveal myself more and more to myself because it reveals God more and more to myself. True contemplation will help me see who I really am, i.e., who I am destined to be in God's sight. True contemplation will work towards transforming my heart. Christ is the privileged center of Christian contemplation, for it is through Christ that I go to God: in knowing Christ, I know God and I know myself. To the extent that *Contemplatio* functions, it protects the entire process of *Lectio Divina* from the danger of imposing a narrow, self-centered interpretation on a text, an interpretation which is divorced from God's perennial purpose in revealing Himself in His Word to all times and all places.

Aspect Five: *Consolatio (Consolation)* This aspect consists in the joy of praying which can come for the believer from a "taste" of God and of the "things" of God . It is a product of the Holy Spirit (though, of course, the Holy Spirit is not confined to *Lectio Divina* , where this consolation is often found). From consolation spring such courageous choices as poverty, chastity, obedience, faithfulness, forgiveness. *Consolation* gives the proper "atmosphere" for these choices. If this "atmosphere" ceases, the intrinsic plausibility of radical Christian choices ceases, and the heart will turn elsewhere for its joy.

Aspect Six: *Discretio (Discernment)* This aspect consists in the ability of the believer to discern the mind of God as expressed in His Word, especially as it is expressed in His supreme Word, Christ. By contact with God's Word and with God's supreme Word we acquire an instinct for the choices which are proper to a Christian, which are proper to myself as God wants me to be. My heart must be dominated by the heart of Christ, by the instincts of Christ, by the choices of Christ. And this, not only for my personal life, but for my life as a member of Christ's Body which is the Church.

Aspect Seven: *Deliberatio (Choice)* This aspect consists in the actual choosing by the believer of some course of action. It is here that the choices involved in choosing a particular vocation, or of living out a particular vocation, are clustered. God communicates with me as an individual, and I respond to Him on the basis of this individual communication. If this communication is interrupted, my choice of vocation or my living out of my vocation is in danger of being destroyed. I will begin to listen to other voices which issue calls to a different vocation.

Aspect Eight: *Actio (Action)* This aspect consists in the putting into practice of what is the fruit of all of the above. As a believer I engage in *Lectio Divina* to understand better what I must do to respond to God's communication with me in Scripture and I can do it. To act follows to be. *Lectio Divina* seeks to shape my acting by first of all shaping my being. Above all, *Actio* is about my choice of vocation and my living out of my vocation. But, of course, it must always be remembered that a vocation is not only a private thing between myself and God. It is a personal faith choice with social consequences, for it always involves the Body of Christ.