

Group Lectio Divina: A Transformative Prayer Process

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Birthed by the desert monks, brought forward in the tradition, and renewed today, *lectio divina* is a transformative method of prayer used in the *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA), in retreats, and in small faith-sharing groups. At Little Flower Catholic Church, we employ it in all periods of the RCIA and on retreats, finding that it leads the inquirers, catechumens, candidates, and all those in the ministries of initiation to deep engagement with the word of God, calling everyone to live the “lessons” of scripture. Someone once said to me (adapting from the movie *Forrest Gump*), “*lectio divina* is like a box of chocolates, for you never know what you are going to get and it challenges you to grow in faith.”

ALLOWING THE WORD TO CHALLENGE

What is *lectio divina*? From the Latin, it is often translated as “sacred” or “divine reading” of scripture. From the desert monks, *lectio divina* is allowing oneself to be challenged and transformed by the fire of the word of God. The focus of these early Christians was not to read the scriptures but to live them. Thus, for them, *lectio divina* was synonymous with *sacra pagina* as the study of sacred scripture for the believer seeking the voice of God to live God’s word. We see this with Elijah (1 Kings 19:12) as he expects the Lord at the mouth of the cave, but the Lord comes not in the strong wind, earthquake, or fire but in a tiny, whispering sound. Thus, for one

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praying with a biblical passage, the goal of *lectio divina* is to experience the fire of conversion and do our best to live it.¹

THE PROCESS OF *LECTIO DIVINA* What are the mechanics to *lectio divina*? First, a biblical passage is chosen. The length of the selection is vital, for a passage that is too long will be difficult. One of the Sunday or daily scriptures consisting of four to ten verses is a good starting place. (Or the entire Bible could be prayed through gradually with *lectio divina*.) The individual slowly progresses through the stages of reading (*lectio*), ruminating (meditation), prayer or responding (*oratio*), and contemplation (*contemplatio*). When done in a group setting, the passage is proclaimed aloud four or five times. In the first two proclamations, the group is invited to repeat words or phrases aloud. In the third proclamation, the group interprets the text. In the fourth proclamation, the members of the group allow the text to interpret them. The group may proclaim the passage a fifth time and allow scripture to interpret the group as a whole—whether the group consists of a couple, family, small group, parish, or other ecclesial body.

Group *lectio divina* is about three movements. First, in proclaiming the text twice and then repeating words or phrases that strike the members, the goal is to familiarize the ears of our hearts with God's word, so that we begin to know it by heart. Second, the passage is proclaimed and then we interpret the text. What do I hear this text saying in general? How is it speaking to me after hearing it three times? The response to this question is usually shared with a partner and then in the larger group. Delving into the text, we see what it has to offer us in a general sense. This reading and sharing can give insight, vision, or a new understanding of God's word. This movement can lean toward interpretations of the text that confirm our lives without God's word challenging us, depending on the group and its posture toward God's word. Yet, since we often share this with a partner or small group and then in the larger group, it can create accountability through genuine honesty.

Third, we allow the text to interpret us. How does the text interpret my life? How does this text call me to live? What claims does this word of God make on my life? How is the text, perhaps, interrogating me or reading me? The response to this question is usually shared with a partner and then in the larger group. This

movement can be scary and risky, for just like every entity in the Church, we must submit to the binding authority of the word of God which flows from the Word of God—Jesus Christ. This assumes that I understand faith not only as intellectual growth, but faith as a leaning into life; that is, daily walking, choosing, and making decisions by faith and not by sight or guarantee. Thus, after reading the text four times, we allow ourselves to become vulnerable to the text. This can turn my life and our lives in Christ around. Like the desert monks, we are reading and praying with the Bible, so that we might live its message.

This fourth reading of the text is similar to accounts in the Gospel in which Jesus Christ, the Word of God, is encountered. We see this especially in John. Jesus meets someone; a conversation or an encounter then leads to Jesus' "interpreting" that person and calling the individual to the way of conversion. We see this with Nicodemus, the woman at the well, the man born blind, and all those at the tomb of Lazarus, and Lazarus himself. The experience usually refashions the person, for the presence of the divine is engaged. Often what is occurring is not realized until far into the process, or even afterward. Those willing to take the risk find that *lectio divina* allows them to see with the eyes of faith.

The Bishops at the XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in Rome in October 2008 noted that the process in *lectio divina* leads to conversion. In their statement after the synod "The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church," they reflected on our response during the prayer:

Tradition has introduced the practice of *lectio divina*, the prayerful reading in the Holy Spirit that is able to open to the faithful the treasure of the word of God, and also to create the encounter with Christ, the living divine word. This begins with the reading (*lectio*) of the text And one ends with contemplation (*contemplatio*) during which we assume, as God's gift, the same gaze in judging reality and ask ourselves: what conversion of the mind, the heart and life does the Lord ask of us?²²

PERSPECTIVES ON *LECTIO DIVINA*

How do people experience *lectio divina*? As the stories of the people in this article will show, the experiences are varied. Some are

enthusiastic about this additional way of praying. Others were hesitant but soon appreciative of the method, and some did not find *lectio divina* beneficial.

Laura, who was received into full communion within the past 18 months called the prayer “wonderfully illuminating.” She explained, “It provides such a useful, practical, organized method for allowing the word of God to genuinely penetrate my mind and soul.”

The depth of *lectio divina* surprised Susan, when she experienced it at the North American Forum on the Catechumenate’s Beginnings Institute. “At first, I thought, oh this is going to be so easy for me—I’ll just read the Gospel twice,” she said, adding, “and ask the questions in between readings. However, stepping into scripture became more of a soul endeavor for me.”

Lectio divina had a “great impact” on Sheryl, when she prayed with it at the same institute. “It was the process that inspired me. It was truly the first time I had ever been exposed to that type of prayer.” She was so intrigued that she researched the prayer. “It was that important to me to not only understand, but to share it with our RCIA [parish] team. I was so excited about using this method that I immediately found a pertinent reading that I wanted to apply the process to.”

Jenny, an RCIA sponsor, was introduced to *lectio divina* on an Advent retreat. “I was taken by the energy and movement of the passage,” she said. She noted that the combined physical and intellectual engagement of the text resulted in a spiritual connection to the word. “It was a powerful, hopeful, and even a challenging experience of my place as a Christian disciple in that energy.”

Lou, who experienced *lectio divina* during a retreat and Bible study, had been hesitant about the process. “My first reactions were somewhat negative, because the prayer is repetitive. I often find myself thinking that the passage is self-evident, or that all I am going to do is repeat what someone else has said,” he noted. “The later rounds of the prayer are more comfortable to me, because they seem more open-ended. . . . I like the two-sided approach of looking at my thoughts on the passage as well as looking at how my thoughts and actions might change because of the passage. . . . the thoughts of others invariably lead me to new ideas.”

Though Maria was initially uncomfortable with praying aloud and felt unqualified to interpret scripture, she now sees its effects.

“The first time I participated in *lectio divina*, my stress level shot up and I wanted to run out of the room,” she said. “That has changed. I actually like *lectio divina* now. I’m past my fear of repeating the ‘wrong’ word. . . . I like hearing the words and phrases that other people say. . . . it gives me a sudden shift in perspective, and I look at the passage differently. . . . I see *lectio divina* as a gentle process that has allowed me to gain spiritual confidence and growth.”

Ed, on the other hand, finds no value in *lectio divina*. “For me, personally, I do not care for it. Perhaps I am not as deeply involved in a prayer of this type, and although I can pick out words that stand out, no one word is more significant than another. I don’t mind sharing with my neighbors, but seldom do I find any special insight in my or their sharing.”

Some, like Maria and Lou, grow into an appreciation of *lectio divina*, and others like Ed may not find *lectio divina* prayerful, as not all ways of prayer will touch everyone.

EXPERIENCING THE ORDER AND PROCLAMATIONS How do some *lectio divina* participants experience the order and the first two proclamations of the word? Laura explained that she appreciated the sequential order of the process. “The steps are in the right sequence,” she said. “They move from intuitive to progressively more analytic responses. This is important, because if you were to ask me to start this exercise by naming explicitly . . . my most pressing spiritual need, then I would probably name the wrong thing—that is, I would give the answer that I thought sounded good.” Thus, for Laura, it is helpful to start by intuitively repeating words and phrase twice: “By starting, instead, with intuitive . . . responses to the fresh, new, and unchosen-by-me words in the scripture passage, this exercise forces me out of the fruitless verbal formulas that I have been repeating to myself . . . that falsely define and limit my perception of my real spiritual state. I’m usually completely surprised by the words that leap out that I’m moved to repeat.”

Laura offered poignant details into her experience of the first two proclamations: “I often find that, during the first round, I hear a word that I feel moved to repeat, but I worry that it’s the wrong word, or else I’m initially disturbed by its implications—that is, it could be a word that names what I am really afraid to face and so I



During the repeated proclamations of the scripture during *lectio divina*, we allow the text to interpret our lives.

understandably hesitate to ‘name’ it. But if the word keeps resonating in me, then I know I need to own it, and the second round allows that opportunity.”

Sheryl, too, noted that the first reading helped people to focus and listen. “I found the repeating of words and phrases to be helpful because it brought me to a higher level of opening myself to the message and seeing some things that others had seen or heard that I may have missed.”

Lou has found that the steps make a difference. “The patience,” he said, “in the first two rounds of sharing pays off by encouraging deeper, more reflective answers in the final two rounds.” Thus, proclaiming the passage twice followed by the repeating of words and phrases each time appears to till the ground of the heart, making it fertile for God’s word leading to the third and fourth proclamations with personal sharing.

What experience do a few participants offer about the third proclamation, including responding to the questions, How do I interpret this passage? How does it strike me in general? Susan noted that the group enlarged how she considered the passage. She said that her institute group pointed out “insights and words that

had not come to mind, which brought about a new way of considering what Jesus . . . was wanting me to see." Sheryl said that listening to the proclamation over and over helped her reflect. "This time," she said, "it was presented to a spirit already groomed to listen and hear—and gather all the nuances of the message."

Lou, too, said that the additional proclamations provided another way of seeing the passage and a chance to voice his reflections. "Others . . . introduce perspectives that I would not have considered. Sometimes it gives me the courage to speak up, and other times it gives me a new path to follow without speaking."

As does Lou, Laura has a sense of the order's potential: "It seems essential to me that we take the time to interpret the passage on its own terms, in context, and also that we share a variety of interpretations in group discussion. This broadens my access to the passage's many truths and enables me—again—to break out of the limits of my own limited vision and wisdom." Laura also has found that it stretches her experience of God, allowing her "to experience God as other than myself, outside myself, and, therefore, God as able to enlighten my darkness. God brings himself to me in his own words, and not in mine: that's crucial." Thus, the step of interpreting the text can begin the process of transformation.

As the passage is proclaimed a fourth time and more sharing takes place, some may find that the passages become embedded in them, while others discover that intimacy and accountability increase. The questions this time are: How does this passage interpret me? How does it call me to live? Maria has realized that, with the repetition comes a connectedness to the scripture. "I have now found," she said, "that when I hear the passages again, in other contexts, I find them more meaningful. I also notice that different words and phrases stand out. What I hear seems to have adjusted to my life and perspective at that particular moment . . . making it more personal for me."

Jenny noted that she has begun to completely open herself up to the people in her small faith-sharing group. She said that she will share how the text interprets her. "The ability to share intimately with people I love and journey, although at times I may feel naked, is where prayer has taken me," she said. "And where prayer has taken me must be where God is found." Similarly, Laura said that the prayer takes her full circle—back to her life and how she should

be living. “I especially appreciate that this step requires me not just to be self-examining and self-interpreting, but also to be accountable.” She said that the first question (“interpret me” in the fourth reading of the passage) is “necessary for self-examination and therefore an essential step. But the second question (“call me to live”) is in some ways the most important, for it requires me to translate insight into action, word into act, if you like—to make the word flesh within myself . . . to flesh it out, so to speak.”

Relating the effects of *lectio divina* on many levels, Laura said, “The sharing also has an important Christian fellowship aspect: as others reveal their spiritual struggles, I realize that I’m not all alone in mine; because of everyone’s good faith commitment to honesty, and the loving safety of the created space, I’m able to be as truthful to myself about myself as I have discernment to be, which is the only way to directly address my spiritual weaknesses and, therefore, to access God’s help in acquiring the insight and strength to change as I need and want to do.”

What is the cumulative effect on Laura in this process? She says, “It allows me to confess and to be healed, by which I mean to confess and yet to still be loved, accepted, forgiven, corrected, affirmed, encouraged, and supported.”

For Laura, accountability is an integral part of group *lectio divina*: “Public sharing makes me accountable to others, and not just to myself, for answering God’s ‘call to live’ in a better way, for I have all these witnesses in the group! Their presence reminds me that I am accountable to a community, and not just to myself, for applying the spiritual insights I’ve gained from our *lectio divina* conversations to my actual life. . . . My sharing with others reminds me that my relationship to God is not some private thing that only happens inside of me: God calls me to live lovingly always among, with, and for others.”

Group *lectio divina* has great potential for transformation. Many good books and resources that focus on *lectio divina* as a personal, individual prayer process are available. I am aware of no book with a primary focus on group *lectio divina*. Yet, I am well aware of the experience of the group process that has been handed down from our ancestors in faith to the living body of Christ. The process is rather simple to use in many areas of Church mission and life, yet the results can be truly transforming.

NOTES

1. Abbot Armand Veilleux, osco, "Lectio Divina as a School of Prayer among the Fathers of the Desert." The translation of a talk given at the Centre Saint-Louis-des-Français in Rome, in November 1995. Cf. <http://users.skynet.be/scourmont/Armand/wri/lectio-eng.htm>.

2. Holy See Press Office, *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin* (English Edition). XII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 5–26, 2008. *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*. This bulletin is only a working instrument for the press. Translations are unofficial. Cf. http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_22_xii-ordinaria-2008/02_inglese/b09_02.html.