

Lectio divina – What? How? Br. Martin Thaller Sam. FLUHM
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This is a summary of the Novitiate Paper by Br. Philemon from the Zisterzienserstift Heiligenkreuz. A cordial thank you for making this paper available!

Lectio divina

Lectio divina is a "method" of contemplating Scripture that has been tried and tested since the time of the Church Fathers and which is intended to help us today to approach the sacred texts. Lectio divina is not reading to increase knowledge, but rather a way of prayer and a guide for life. The contemplation of Scripture is not only for monks or professionals, but rather for "all who believe in Christ", as Dei Verbum 25 puts it, a fruit of the Second Vatican Council (end: 1965). DV exhorts to the regular reading of the Bible so that one may be permeated by its spirit, the Holy Spirit. Pope Benedict XVI said in one of his general audiences that the lectio divina will help the Church to a new springtime. In saying this, he will have been expressing something not just incidental but almost prophetic. In recent years, the many publications again indicate an increased longing for the encounter of God in His Word.

The word lectio divina is usually translated as divine reading or reading of God. Br. Philemon uses the term "God-enthusiastic reading". This expresses a state of wonder that God communicates Himself to us in His Word. St Gregory the Great said that God sent us a letter because communication has been impaired since the Fall. Pope Benedict XVI, then still Cardinal Ratzinger, writes that being a Christian is realised to the extent that one is like the Son, by becoming a Son, that is, by not standing on one's own and not isolated in oneself, but by living completely open in the "from" and "towards". From the Father through Christ and towards the others. The goal of lectio divina is the encounter with HIM, the living God. It shall not so much be learning about God, but learning from God and with God, and this only through Jesus Christ, who is the only mediator to the Father. When the Church Fathers read the Bible, they were not reading texts, they were reading the living Christ and Christ spoke to them.

Dei Verbum underlines the importance of the Word of God by writing:

"The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures just as she venerates the body of the Lord, since, especially in the sacred liturgy, she unceasingly receives and offers to the faithful the bread of life from the table both of God's word and of Christ's body."

Christ offers Himself to the faithful both in the Eucharistic bread and in His Word.

Origin

"Lectio divina begins as early as in Judaism. The first Christian testimony, however, we have stems from Origen from the first half of the 3rd century. There he writes in a letter:

"Devote yourself to the lectio of the divine Scriptures; strive for it with perseverance. Engage in the lectio with the intention of believing and pleasing God. If, during lectio, you find yourself in front of a closed door, knock and that guard of whom Jesus said, "The doorkeeper will open it for him" - will open it for you. When you devote yourself to lectio divina in this way, search honestly and with unshakeable trust in God for the meaning of the divine Scriptures, which is hidden in them in rich abundance. However, you must not be satisfied with knocking and searching. To understand the things of God, you absolutely need the oratio. Particularly to exhort us to this, the Saviour not only said to us, "Seek and you will find", and "Knock and it will be opened to you", but he added - Ask and you will receive."

Building on this outline, Guigo the Carthusian puts it into a four-step ladder. He understands them as spiritual exercises, namely lectio (reading) which seeks the joy of eternal life, meditatio (meditation) which discovers this joy, oratio (prayer) which implores it and contemplatio (contemplation) which tastes it.

Structure

Lectio

Here the solid food is brought to the mouth, it means a reading with an attentive mind. It is the stage of searching. It is not a purely intellectual process, a purely rational approach, but an internalisation. The aim of lectio is to allow an encounter, to let it affect you, to taste and enjoy it. When I read the Scriptures, God is "He", but when I read them in faith and prayer, God becomes "You", that is, he is my counterpart, He speaks to me and I answer him.

Meditatio

Meditation is about depth. The Word of God always wants to become concretely effective in the individual, always wants to become flesh in us anew, in order to thereby become effective and powerful. In the NT, this activity is translated as contemplation. In doing so, a Bible verse that has appealed to one is often repeated. The desert fathers called this ruminatio (ruminating). Contemplating the Lord's instruction by day and by night (cf. Ps 1).

Oratio

In prayer, what has been set in motion by reading and meditation and has been recognised as requiring redemption is brought before the face of God. Guigo states: "The soul, then, sees that it cannot attain the longed-for sweetness of knowledge and experience out of itself." From this, a petition or thanksgiving, a wrestling with God, but also lamentation and even accusation may result. It is important that the person praying brings up what he perceives in his innermost being and brings it to the surface in prayer, before the face of God. This can sometimes be a very painful process. But it is the only way that will eventually be healing."

Contemplatio

By contemplation, the goal of lectio divina, Guigo understands the spirit lifted up to God which tastes the joy of eternal bliss, which becomes one with God. On the way to this goal, through lectio divina, through listening to one another, we come to know God more and more intimately. This intimacy ultimately wants to be a support for man on his pilgrimage through life, a foundation on which all further relationships can be built. It is the secure foundation on which to build.

Pope Benedict adds a fifth step to the ladder:

"Moreover, it is good to remember that lectio divina in its dynamism is not complete until it reaches the action (actio) which spurs the life of the believer to make himself a gift for others in love."

Of what use are insights gained through reading and prayer if they do not merge with one's own life.

From the Catechism:

"Prayer and the Christian life cannot be separated."

Possible complications

As already mentioned, lectio divina is prayer, and prayer is always a gift of grace and a determined response on our part. Therefore, it requires our constant effort. There are two forces that can cause our effort to become shaky. One is the tempter, Satan, and the other is our own person. Therefore, the most important points are now enumerated:

Disbelief: The most common and hidden temptation, according to the Catechism, is the lack of faith. This does not mean a general lack of faith, such as the non-existence of God. God, but rather a lack of trust that in the contemplation of Scripture an encounter with God really takes place which changes, even heals, the person.

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Dryness: Discouragement, by the sad apprehension of not having given God everything, or that the heart feels separated from God, without desire for spiritual thoughts, memories and feelings. The lectio divina is not about feelings, but about action: consistency, perseverance, persistence, zeal. The Word of God shall not return empty to God but it shall accomplish the purpose for which he sent it out (cf. Is 55).

Distraction: The experience of distraction is unavoidable. One is tempted to give it up because one cannot absorb and retain anything of what one has read. Even if the soul retains nothing of what it contemplates, it has been purified more than the one that does not contemplate. (cf. Apophtegmas)

Impatience: If the fruits are not immediately visible, or if I rashly think that I already know the text, I am inclined to give up lectio and resort to something that promises more stimulation and enrichment, where I have more of my own initiative. But: "Lord, where shall we go? You have words of eternal life." (Jn 6)

The fruits of lectio divina are manifold. But first and foremost, it makes us Christ-like. We enter into a process of transformation and healing that makes us more and more like HIM. So that we can speak with St. Paul: It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. (Gal 2). Christ himself wants to transform us in His Word, which is He is Himself, towards a life in fullness.

May the Lord gift you from the riches of his glory!