

A Conference on Lectio Divina
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Why to Practice and Teach *Lectio Divina*

We believe that everyone yearns to have a relationship with the Holy Trinity. As part of our response to God's love, we study theology to develop that relationship and ensure that others can develop in it in ways that are true, good, and beautiful. We, theologians, however, can lose sight sometimes that to listen to the Word of God without any goal other than to pray is fundamental for each person's relationship with God. The Bible is much more than a source text. Historically, while the Church has been the first point of contact for every believer, the Bible has been –infant baptism aside– the place where that encounter with Christ has usually started to become a personal relationship. In our own lives, either before or during our first Catechesis, we were read, or read for ourselves, a Bible story; in it we learned of a God who has loved us and has had a personal message of salvation and transformation for us, and we responded with joy. It was to the power of the Word of God, to the presence of Christ conveyed by it, that we responded. Today, we need to recall to ourselves and our believers the efficacy of that same power. The power of the Word of God is not limited merely to beginning one's relationship with Christ or nurturing it intellectually; it continues to offer yet-unprocessed personal messages and graces of salvation and transformation. *Dei Verbum* explains, "For in the sacred books, the Father who is in heaven meets His children with great love and speaks with them; and the force and power of the Word of God is so great that it remains the support and energy of the Church, the strength of faith for her sons, the food of the soul, the pure and perennial source of spiritual life."¹ In sum, the Bible continues to offer us the opportunity for a relationship. In our ongoing response to God, to open ourselves to the powerful presence of the Word of God ranks in importance for developing our relationship with God behind only participating in liturgies and sacraments in which both God's Word and work are combined. Given that to remain present to God's Word is a powerful preparation for the sacraments, praying the Bible can be almost as essential as the sacraments. To pray the Bible is the private practice *par excellence* for developing one's relationship with Christ, and all other devotions are merely variations on this basic personal prayer of opening oneself to the power of God, otherwise they would be gnostic or moralistic. So, we pray with the Bible because it is the natural way of developing in our relationship with the Trinity.

Sadly, Catholics have distanced themselves from this easily-accessible devotion. A recent survey of never-married young adults in the United States found that only 6% of all respondents either studied or prayed with the Bible regularly.² A recent survey of new religious found that while just over half of them had studied the Bible, only 3 in 10 of them had *opened themselves to the Bible with the sole objective of praying with it* regularly before having entered religious life.³ These numbers are not terribly surprising given the

¹ *Dei Verbum*, 21.

² Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Georgetown University Washington, D.C., *Consideration of Priesthood and Religious Life Among Never-Married U.S. Catholics*, September 2012, page 41 (in Appendix 1) <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/upload/survey-of-youth-and-young-adults-on-vocations.pdf>

³ Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Georgetown University Washington, DC, *New Sisters and Brothers Professing Perpetual Vows in Religious Life*, p. 19-20 (in Appendix 1)

complexities in both exegesis and Biblical interpretation and the historical hesitations about lay people engaging with these complexities. The numbers do, however, validate that Catholics either do not know how to connect with the Word of God privately in a prayerful way or do not value it. If “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ,” as Saint Jerome put it, then Catholics can very likely improve their relationships with Christ through some instruction on why and how to connect with the Bible outside of their liturgical practices. Given the unsurpassed strength and flexibility of the Catholic approach to inspiration (and thereby exegesis), in which we embrace that the authors of the Scriptures were both completely under the light of divine inspiration and also working under their own powers (expect for prophecy); given the eternal integrity of the interpretation of Scripture by the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church and our rich apologetics and study Bibles, and given the second Vatican Council’s call for engagement with the Bible, the time has come for Catholics to overcome their fears of the Word of God. For the sake of Catholics’ relationships with God, we, theologians, must lead them back to praying with the Bible.

The practice of *Lectio divina* is the answer to one’s personal need to open oneself to the Word of God privately and the Catechist’s remedy for the widespread failure to do so in the Church. It is a private, non-liturgical opening of oneself, in the presence of the Father, to the Word of God, so that the Spirit of God can interpret a chosen part of revelation at length in an setting in which one focuses solely on a prayerful development of one’s relationship with God. Its essence is to stay open and empty before the Word of God and the Spirit of God in a prayerful way. Given that it is practiced without any motive of achieving some objective other than a prayerful listening, this devotion differs from all other academic, intellectual, and study-oriented interactions with the Word of God. It is no less than an encounter with both the Word of God and the Spirit of God, in which one listens more to the spiritual senses of Scripture than to the literal sense of it, and so its Latin title can be more properly translated as divinely-inspired reading (and listening), rather than merely divine reading. If prayer is, generally-speaking, a conversation within a relationship, then *lectio divina* is the way in which one listens to the persons of the Holy Trinity in a two-sided conversation. Saint Ambrose said, “To him we speak, when we pray; him we hear, when the divine oracles we read.”⁴ Saint Isidore of Seville said, “He who always wants frequently to be with God must pray and read frequently. For when we pray, we are speaking with God; when we read, the true God speaks with us.”⁵ All relationships develop by means of both encounters and two-sided conversations. Often, however, our relationships need more practice in listening and receiving than in giving. With regard to our relationship with God, to think about God, to talk to God, and to act for God are always secondary to hearing and receiving love from God. *Lectio divina*, then, is not one devotion among many; rather, it is the means by which one grows in listening in one’s relationship with God.

<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/consecrated-life/profession-class/upload/profession-class-2012-report.pdf>

⁴ Saint Ambrose, *Patrologia Latina* (hereafter: PL), 16, 50: “*Illum alloquimur, cum oramus: illum audimus, cum divina legimus oracula*” (<http://latina.patristica.net/>)

⁵ Saint Isidore of Seville, PL 83, 679: “*Qui vult cum Deo semper esse frequenter debet orare frequenter et legere. Nam cum oramus cum Deo ipsi loquimur cum vero legimus Deus nobis cum loquitur.*”

How to Practice *Lectio Divina*

What follows in this section is a generic method for *lectio divina* with some comments on how to do it. While this outlines how to accomplish *lectio divina*, the overall introduction to *lectio divina* will not be complete until the end of the following section on what can occur within this framework. The next section, therefore, will examine the potential content of the meditation, considering in depth how the Spirit may highlight either the literal sense of Scripture or one of the three spiritual senses of Scripture, whereas this section merely outlines the framework in which those meditations occur.

A generic method for *lectio divina* is:

- Set a reasonable period of time for the prayer and begin your session.

Beginners should perhaps start with sessions of fifteen to thirty minutes, so that the sessions are manageable and repeatable. To go over the period of time in a certain session is certainly acceptable, but having done so recently does not necessarily mean that the typical period for your sessions should automatically be lengthened. As with exercise, overall success should be measured by faithfulness to your sessions, rather than how long the most satisfying sessions last. When you have persevered to the end in several difficult sessions and practiced *lectio* several times even though you did not feel like it at the beginning, then you will know the optimal period of time for your typical sessions.

- Choose the desired text(s).

As a general rule, the text(s) should not be longer than those read in a liturgy, so as to eliminate the objective of reading for merely learning or pleasure. The Gospel or readings for the next Sunday or of that day are good options. An ongoing continuous reading of the Bible is acceptable, but you should try to include some section of the gospel rather regularly, if not daily. You can choose the text at random, but you cannot force a randomly-chosen text to answer a pre-set question, such as how specifically to react to a specific problem, for forcing any text to do so would be a fundamentalistic accommodation of the text to your desires.

- Pray to the Holy Spirit to guide you, to help you to overcome distractions, and to bring this period of prayer to a successful conclusion.
- Take a few minutes, if possible, to collect / center yourself.

This can be done by using a centering prayer, such as “God come to my assistance, Lord make haste to help me” (Ps 69:1), the Jesus Prayer, or “Come, Holy Spirit.”

- Read the text(s), perhaps twice at first, listening attentively for something the Spirit wants to explore with you in greater depth. Return to the text(s) again, as necessary. If helpful, write a homily to yourself.

Similar to the spiritual way in which a priest opens himself to both the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit in preparation for a homily for a specific audience, so too you can open yourself to both the Word of God and the Holy Spirit privately by writing a homily to yourself or performing a reflection or meditation in a similar spirit.

Any surprising insights, especially those relevant to your life, are the echoes of the text that are sought in the process of *lectio divina*. A beginner may only notice a surprising insight, or echo, after having started to write a homily to himself or after having started a reflection on the text. Do not write a homily to others; in a private setting, doing so would turn your private prayerful listening into a prayerful giving; in a group setting, doing so could be pharisaical (as in Lk 18:11).

- If some aspect of your life continues to distract you, converse with God about this distraction from your relationship, thereby giving it over to God.

To recognize and give an ongoing obstacle over to God is a constructive use of time, for it is an important step in growing in the peace necessary to grow further by way of *lectio divina*.

- At the end, ask God for help with any consequences of your meditation, form a firm resolve to carry them into practice, and give thanks.

As with any method, this one is only a guide. To pray as the Spirit prompts you to pray is more important than any method, and his invitation to prayer can occur at any point. You will likely be called to meditate on a certain echo of the text for your own life or context, but you may also be called into exploring related notes or passages, conversation with God, mental prayer, etc. You must only resist the temptation to abandon a prayerful openness by making a priority of some other objective. While *lectio divina* can indeed involve looking at notes and commentaries about the text in question, so as to understand its historical sense well enough to consider a spiritual message from it, *lectio divina* should be more than mere Bible-study, academic study, the preparation of a homily, etc. While insights for your homilies or work may come to you during *lectio*, you should merely jot them down for fuller consideration afterwards. The only real rule is to attempt to give time to developing in your relationship with the Persons of the Trinity through a disposition of listening to the Word of God and the Holy Spirit for your own relationship.

If *lectio* is done as a group, which can provide a good introduction for how to do it alone, then the group should dedicate perhaps fifteen minutes of quiet time to follow the above method in condensed form and another period of time, perhaps of fifteen minutes, in which to share any echoes members want to volunteer. With beginners, especially for those unaccustomed to the need for a magisterial guide to interpreting the Bible, it is very important to train the group to avoid comments that merely opine on the Bible –there follows herein a section dedicated to this issue. Among teenagers, it has been found that peer-to-peer interaction provides for more fruitful discussions than having an adult present, and so older students should be trained in how to lead younger students in *lectio*

in a meaningful way. The Manquehue movement in Santiago, Chile, which is a lay Benedictine movement of adults and students, provides successful models for how to conduct group lectio with groups of various ages.

What Occurs in *Lectio Divina*: Some Comments on the Content of the Meditation

Sacred Scripture, being the Word of God, is rich in meaning in various forms across time. This fact is evident from the New Testament itself, in which various authors used either an event or a person from the Old Testament as a type or prefiguration for an event or person in the New Testament. The Lamb of God from Exodus 12:46, for example, is presented as a prefiguration for Jesus in the Gospel of John (most explicitly in John 19:36). Similar cases can be found in John 3:14; 1 Cor 10:6; Gal 4:24; Rm 5:14; and 1 Pt 3,21. In *lectio divina*, one opens himself to both the Word of God and the Spirit of God to hear the echo of the text relevant to his context. When the author of the fourth Gospel examined Exodus 12:46, he was led to think of Christ as the new Lamb of God. Similarly, when we examine the Song of Songs, we can, like Saint Bernard, see a type or prefiguration of the union God wants with each of us. Typology has been widespread in the history of the Church, and it was often used by some of its most famous preachers. Early theologians, such as Origen and Saint John Cassian, distinguished four categories by which the polysemous nature of Scripture can be interpreted: through the literal / historical sense of Scripture, the analogical sense, the anagogical sense, and the tropological or moral sense. The content of the meditation of *lectio divina* is whatever sense of Scripture the Spirit uses to bring one to prayer, and so one must understand each sense of Scripture in its own place to understand any potential echo received.

Let us begin with the historical / literal sense, for it is the basis on which all spiritual interpretations hinge and the measure by which all fundamentalistic accommodations of a text should be rejected. The Second Vatican Council's Dogmatic Constitution on the Word of God, *Dei Verbum*, described the approach for interpreting the literal / historical sense of Scripture:

However, since God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion, the interpreter of Sacred Scripture, in order to see clearly what God wanted to communicate to us, should carefully investigate what meaning the sacred writers really intended, and what God wanted to manifest by means of their words.⁶

A given text, therefore, cannot be read without the intention of the author in mind, and additional techniques for understanding the exact intention of the author in his context are also necessary. With regard to this sense serving as the basis for other senses, Saint Gregory the Great supported a knowledge of the historical sense of the text in saying, "We must first fix the root of history, that we may afterwards satisfy ourselves of the fruit of

⁶ *Dei Verbum*, 12

allegory.”⁷ Pope Benedict XV, in *Spiritus Paraclitus*, affirmed the same by means of Saint Jerome’s opinion on the necessity of staying within the confines set by the literal meaning of the text:

“Indeed, he himself affords the best refutation of those who maintain that he says that certain passages have no historical meaning: “We are not rejecting the history, we are merely giving a spiritual interpretation of it.” Once, however, he has firmly established the literal or historical meaning, Jerome goes on to seek out deeper and hidden meanings, as to nourish his mind with more delicate food.”⁸

In practice, one should use exegesis to understand a text, but one should not limit himself to exegesis, for attending also to the spiritual senses of Scripture are important in the devotion of *lectio*.⁹

A careful reading of *Dei Verbum* 12 (above), would note that God could want to manifest more meanings to a certain text than those intended by the sacred human author; those additional meanings are the three spiritual meanings of Scripture. Jesus himself reapplied Deuteronomy 8:2-3 in a new and different context when he resisted the devil’s temptation through the quote: “It is not on bread alone that man lives but on every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Mt 4:4). In doing so, Jesus showed those words to have a living power in a new context.

By way of the allegorical sense we understand how the ancient works of salvation history were meant to serve as an allegory for Jesus’s own salvific works, i.e., how the works of the Old Testament prefigured those of the New Testament. Here are some examples: the slavery in Egypt was an allegory of our slavery to sin before baptism; the crossing of the red sea, to the cleansing redemption of baptism itself; the wandering in the desert, to the life of our pilgrim church before the end of time; the manna, to the Eucharist. The allegorical senses of Scripture are many, given that God’s work in salvation history has many recurring themes in it. Considering this sense of Scripture will open to the reader a profoundly spiritual way of interacting with the Old Testament.

Texts with an anagogical sense prefigure not the works of redemption in the New Testament but the realities of heaven and the next life. The allegorical sense “mounts from spiritual mysteries to certain more sublime heavenly secrets,” says St. Cassian.¹⁰ Deuteronomy 8:7-9 recounts the vision of the promised land, the place where liberation from slavery would find its definitive fulfillment; to those with “eyes to see,” it is an obvious anagogical reference to heaven. As already mentioned, many find the Song of Songs to be a prefiguration of the divine union that can start here below but will only reach its ultimate fulfillment in heaven. At the abbey of Saint Mary Mediatrix and Saint Louis, I look forward every year to the 1st reading about Queen Esther interceding for her people as a type of how Our Lady intercedes for us.

⁷ Gregory the Great, PL 75, 528: ..., debemus prius historiae radicem figere, ut valeamus mentem postmodum de allegoariarum fructu satiare.

⁸ Benedict XV, *Spiritus Paraclitus*, 51

⁹ Pius XII defends the importance of the literal sense of Scripture strongly in *Divino Affluente Spiritu*, 25 ff.

¹⁰ Cassian, John. *Conferences*, 14.VIII: <http://www.osb.org/lectio/cassian/conf/book2/conf14.html#14.8>

The final spiritual sense is the tropological, or what is commonly referred to as the moral sense of Scripture. It is the way in which Scripture gives us practical instructions about our lives, usually pertaining to the correction of our lives. Let us return to Matthew 4:4: "It is not on bread alone that man lives but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." That text could serve as a call to read the Bible, to practice *lectio divina*, to begin or foster a personal relationship with Jesus, to rely on the Bible for overcoming some specific temptation, to give up some specific attachment without which one feels he cannot live, etc. Two of the most famous occasions of this sense of the Bible were how the Spirit of God used Romans 13:13-14 to convert Saint Augustine and Matthew 19:21 to prompt Saint Anthony to leave everything for the desert. While most moral interpretations are far from that momentous, these two examples demonstrate the power behind allowing the Spirit to work through the Word of God to speak to our hearts. Obviously Saint Anthony did not believe the words of the gospel were meant merely for Jesus's rich interlocutor; those words spoke directly to Saint Anthony about his situation. The possibilities for this type of interaction with the Bible are many and very helpful, usually calling to mind the next step one needs to take in one's relationship with the Holy Trinity, but these interpretations should be undertaken with prudence and, if necessary, discernment. There are many ways in which one can safely allow a text to preach a personal homily to one's heart, but anything out of the ordinary needs to be tested with the help of a spiritual director. Given that any word can serve as a segue into something the Spirit wants to explore, this sense of Scripture is very pliable. The Holy Spirit, for example, may use only a passing reference to forgiveness as an occasion to discuss the need for forgiveness with someone. One may, however, also mislead oneself with taking too much liberty with the pliability of the moral sense in a non-spiritual way. As with all types of prayer, prudence and discernment are needed. When both are present, the moral sense of Scripture can be a powerful way of listening for the next step or lesson in one's relationship with God.

These senses of Scripture have a long, ongoing, and well-established tradition in the Church. Pope Benedict XVI recently offered a ringing endorsement for the four senses of Scripture in his book, Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration:

When a word transcends the moment in which it is spoken, it carries within itself a 'deeper value.' This 'deeper value' pertains most of all to words that have matured in the course of faith-history. For in this case the author is not simply speaking for himself on his own authority. He is speaking from the perspective of a common history that sustains him and already implicitly contains the possibility of its future, of the further stages of its journey. The process of continually rereading and drawing out new meanings of the words would not have been possible unless the words themselves were already open to it from within.

At this point we get a glimmer, even on the historical level, of what inspiration means: the author does not speak as a private, self-contained subject. He speaks in a living community, that is to say, in a living historical movement not

created by him, nor even by the collective, but which is led forward by a greater power at work. There is a dimension of the word that the old fourfold sense of Scripture pinpointed with remarkable accuracy. The four senses of Scripture are not individual meanings arrayed side by side, but dimensions of the one word that reaches beyond the moment.”¹¹

From the earliest times until today, these senses of Scripture have been present in and embraced by the Church. Their history stretches from the apostolic times through the Patristic period, even through the scholastic period, until today. They are also part of the liturgy of the Church, which is an honored font for theology (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). One who starts to practice *lectio divina* on the readings for the seasons will quickly discover that the first readings are often chosen for their spiritual value relative to the gospel. One who starts to pray the Old Testament with the analogical sense of Scripture in mind will start to appreciate the overall plan of salvation at a deeper level; one who starts to read the Bible with the anagogical sense in mind will find himself marveling at heavenly realities; one who starts to pray with the moral sense in mind will soon find many ways in which the Spirit of God starts to instruct him on his life. The method of the devotion of *lectio divina*, then, is merely a structure by which these spiritual realities may be shared and one’s relationship with God may be deepened through them.

Everyone needs a guide to Sacred Scripture

For this practice to be prayerful and transformative, one needs to allow the Bible to speak to his heart; the worst perversion of this practice would be to justify oneself by reading one’s own life and one’s own opinions into the Bible. Another pitfall would be to misread merely one section of the Bible in a highly erroneous way without proper attention to the overall meaning of the Bible and the consequences of one’s misreading of it. Both of these risks highlight the need for a guide to the Bible. The eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, verses 29-31, also testifies to the need for an authentic Christian guide to the Bible:

And the Spirit said to Philip, ‘Go up and join this chariot.’ So Philip ran to him, and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet, and asked, ‘Do you understand what you are reading? And he said, ‘How can I, unless someone guides me?’ And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

So, each believer, like the Ethiopian eunuch, needs a guide.¹²

In the broadest sense, the Church is this guide, even though it is only the Church’s role in this regard to protect us from error rather than pronounce on every verse of Scripture. When clarifications are needed, one should consider: all of the relevant passages, official doctrine, the interpretations of those closest to Christ, the interpretations of the early Church, and the reflection on Scripture by the great orthodox minds of the Church

¹¹ Ratzinger, Joseph. *Jesus of Nazareth: From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration*, Doubleday, New York, 2007. Pages xix-xx.

¹² For more information, see: <http://www.catholic.com/tracts/scripture-and-tradition>

throughout history. To understand the boundaries of orthodoxy should not stifle one's reading; rather, it should enable one to explore the Bible's depths with greater confidence. The rulings and the dogmas of the Church have been made in order to protect our relationship with Christ, for heresies are mistaken relationships with God. One may bristle at the need to have the teachings of the Church to help him to read the Bible properly, but one must recall that every believer was first introduced to the truth of the Bible by the Church in some way, just like the Ethiopian eunuch. Furthermore, the canon of the New Testament itself depends on the Church that canonized it, for only the inheritors / guarantors of the original mission from Jesus could deem those texts to be compatible with the Church's proclamation. To hold that the Bible can attest to itself is circular reasoning. These and similar apologetic arguments need to be reviewed by any who will lead or undertake *lectio divina*.¹³

When one focuses on the need for complete integrity and authenticity in one's relationship with God, then the need to join oneself fully to a Church and Tradition beyond oneself becomes more apparent and the emptiness of relativism becomes more evident. It is a small step from realizing that the Bible needed to be canonized as Sacred Scripture to believing that the Church's other official teachings are also part of an authentic interaction with the Bible and God's authentic teaching Church. The Church's doctrine can develop organically from within the bounds of Biblical teaching and Tradition, but it cannot contradict what we have received as the truth. We must know where personal interpretations, theological speculations, and spiritual readings can be safely made. Relativism, which either carelessly or ignorantly states that there is a "my truth" against "your truth," is nonsensical. We must live the truth, which sometimes means conforming our lives to truths (indeed, the Truth) beyond our personal opinions. A religion founded on God's revelation would indeed expect God to challenge and change our lives. Protestantism has produced thousands of conflicting denominations and millions of personal interpretations of Christianity that blatantly ignore these necessities. To undertake personal interpretations that conflict with the Church can lead one into errors that make it more difficult to have a fully flourishing relationship with God, due to what one can deny about a Christian's relationship with God, Christian anthropology, the Trinity, or God's will about some aspect of morality. The goal of *lectio divina* is to build a deep relationship of integrity and intimacy with the true God, striving always to understand Him better and conform oneself more to His will, and so the disposition necessary for this process is abhorrence of erroneous interaction with the Word of God.

On the difference between fulfilling a rule for *lectio divina* vs. fulfilling the need for a prayerful listening to God

For those who practice *lectio divina* as a rule of life, the greatest temptation is to fulfill the rule for it by merely studying the Bible or a spiritual author for some other objective, rather than fulfilling the need to connect with God in a profound way. What follows are some notes on the more common ways of undermining the practice of *lectio divina*.

¹³ For more information, see: <http://www.catholic.com/tracts/proving-inspiration>

Someone new to the Word of God, e.g. an adult convert or revert, may feel an insatiable urge merely to read the Bible for the first time. One may follow this desire within the general confines of routine sessions of *lectio divina*, as long as the Word of God is rather new to the person and the objective is nonetheless to develop a relationship with God in a prayerful manner. It is important, however, to maintain the need to open oneself to God deeply in true *lectio divina*. The following story from the Jewish tradition may be of service to anyone with an overly superficial approach: A young rabbinic student once boasted to his teacher of having read the Talmud five times; the teacher responded by saying, "You may have gone into the Talmud five times, but how many times has it gone into you!"

Someone suffering from fatigue may feel prohibited from making a prolonged meditation on a text. In this circumstance, to read continuously throughout the session is an acceptable concession for wanting to fulfill a rule or routine for *lectio divina* in mitigating circumstances, but doing so does not fulfill the need to connect deeply with God in *lectio divina*.

The most frequent and tempting way to fulfill the rule for *lectio* rather than the need for listening prayerfully to God is to change *lectio divina* into a studious approach to spiritual reading. Is spiritual reading, which is the application of this approach to a non-Biblical text by a Christian spiritual master, licit for *lectio divina*? Yes, if done in the same spirit. To read spiritual meditations and commentaries from the masters can be a way of responding spiritually to a Biblical text or to a certain call for spiritual development, but one must try to distinguish a studious approach to spiritual reading from *lectio divina*. An intermediate, especially one who is also a preacher, cannot be long without spiritual reading without impoverishing his spiritual life and preaching, but that is not an excuse to impoverish his prayerful listening to God in *lectio divina* as well. Nonetheless, the Benedictine tradition has long recognized, since probably the time of Saint Benedict¹⁴ and at least the time of St. Benedict of Aniane in the early 9th century, according to Jordan Aumann,¹⁵ that spiritual reading can be licit for fulfilling the rule or routine for *lectio divina*. Given, however, that those monks were probably reading for roughly two hours, due to the Rule of Saint Benedict's allotments of certain hours "*in lectione divina*,"¹⁶ these concessions may have been granted in a context quite different from the short period of time dedicated to the modern devotion of *lectio divina*. Someone who does not have enough time for spiritual reading or is overly drawn to a studious approach to spiritual reading or is experiencing aridity may be tempted to make this time constructive in some way, thereby turning the devotion of *lectio divina* into study or work. To remain empty and passive, rather than to be actively pursuing some other objective that would invert that openness,

¹⁴ Rule of Saint Benedict, 73:3-6: "What page, what passage of the inspired books of the Old and New Testaments is not the truest of guides for human life? What book of the holy catholic Fathers does not resoundingly summon us along the true way to reach the Creator? Then, besides the Conferences of the Fathers, their Institutes and their Lives, there is also the rule of our holy father Basil. For observant and obedient monks, all these are nothing less than tools for the cultivation of virtues..."
Fry, Timothy. *Rule of Saint Benedict* 1980. The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, MN, 1980. pages 295, 297. (hereafter: RB 1980).

¹⁵ Aumann, Jordan. *Christian Spirituality in the Catholic Tradition*. Sheed and Ward, Westminster, p. 81.

* Yet, a testimony to this fact could not be found by this author in the Opera Omnia of Saint Benedict of Aniane in PL, 103.

¹⁶ RB 1980, 48:4, 48:10, 48:14

however, may be what is best for one's relationship. Just as mystical contemplation far exceeds natural philosophical marveling at God's attributes, so too the spiritual listening of *lectio divina* should exceed the mere study of a text, even when that study would be undertaken in a prayerful manner. If one's relationship is dry or empty, it is only a purification, i.e., a lesson in opening oneself more fully in order more fully to receive. A person experiencing aridity would probably benefit most from remaining confident that God, in His Providence and infinite desire for union with him, wants to fill him with spiritual gifts by way of perseverance in the devotion of *lectio divina*. A deeply contemplative disposition for a short period of the devotion of *lectio divina* would tend to combine it with mental prayer more than spiritual reading or study. Hildemar, who studied the work of Saint Benedict of Aniane and wrote a commentary on the Rule of Saint Benedict in the mid 9th century, noted in his commentary that reading should be done in a way that would allow for contemplation and tears.¹⁷ Given that we want to create a circumstance in which contemplation and tears may occur, spiritual reading should be accepted as fulfilling the need for the devotion of *lectio divina* whenever it is open to those two results, otherwise it is merely fulfilling a rule.

¹⁷ Hildemar's Commentary of the Rule of Saint Benedict, comments on Chapter 48:17ff., at <http://www.hildemar.org/Chapterlist.html>, reads:

"Fratres, cum lectioni vacant, isto modo debent vacare: illi, qui sunt sub custodia, debent insimul legere cum magistris suis; ceteri vero in claustra, non singillatim per cubicula, aut in dormitorio, sed, sicut dixi, in claustra, et non conjunctim, ut, si vult, contemplationem vel lacrimas possit habere; nam si insimul legerint, non possunt compunctionem vel lacrimas habere."

"Brothers, when they spend their time reading, they ought to be free in this way: for those who are under custody, they should be together with their masters to read; the rest, in the cloister, neither alone in the rooms nor in the dormitory, but, as I have said, in the cloister, and not together, so that, if one wants, he can have tears or contemplation, for if they read together, they can not have tears or sorrow to the heart."

Appendix 1: Some excerpts from recent surveys on the use of the Bible by Catholics

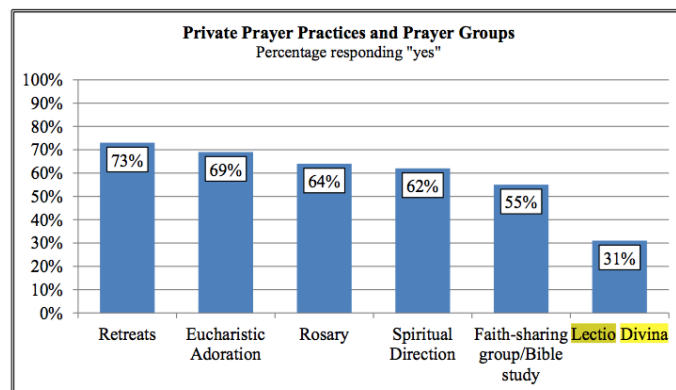
A Survey of Never-Married U.S. Catholics (Young Adults and Teens):

Do you ever participate in any of these prayer practices or groups on a regular basis?
Percentage of each group responding "yes"

	All respondents	Male	Female	Non-Hispanic white adult	Non-Hispanic white teen	Hispanic adult	Hispanic teen	Other race adult	Other race teen
Religious retreats	12%	12%	13%	11%	11%	12%	19%	21%	2%
Popular devotions	11	10	13	10	12	11	13	23	2
Quinceañera	10	9	12	0	0	27	33	1	0
Prayer group	9	9	9	8	6	10	14	18	2
Eucharistic Adoration	7	8	7	7	6	9	8	10	3
Bible study/ Lectio Divina	6	5	7	5	4	8	10	10	3
Home Shrine	4	4	4	1	3	9	5	10	0
Pilgrimage	3	2	5	1	2	9	7	0	0
None of the above	68	70	65	80	70	54	46	62	88

Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Georgetown University Washington, D.C., *Consideration of Priesthood and Religious Life Among Never-Married U.S. Catholics, September 2012, page 41*
<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/upload/survey-of-youth-and-young-adults-on-vocations.pdf>

A Survey of New Sisters and Brothers Professing Perpetual Vows in Religious Life: A question about their regular prayer lives prior to entering religious life:



	Women	Men
Retreats	72%	79%
Eucharistic Adoration	70	67
Rosary	63	67
Spiritual direction	60	67
Faith-sharing group/Bible study	56	50
Lectio Divina	30	33

*Percentages sum to more than 100 because respondents could select more than one category.

Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate Georgetown University Washington, DC, *New Sisters and Brothers Professing Perpetual Vows in Religious Life, p. 19-20*
<http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/vocations/consecrated-life/profession-class/upload/profession-class-2012-report.pdf>

Appendix 2: An exercise in *lectio divina* in a group setting

- 1) Pray to the Holy Spirit to guide you, to help you to overcome distractions, and to bring this period of prayer to a successful conclusion.
- 2) Take a few minutes, if possible, to collect / center yourself.
E.g., repeat: “God come to my assistance, Lord make haste to help me” (Ps 69:1).
- 3) Read the text(s), perhaps twice at first, listening attentively for something the Spirit wants to explore with you in greater depth. Return to the text(s) again, as necessary. If helpful, write a homily to yourself.
Any surprising insights, especially those relevant to your life, are the echoes of the text that are sought in the process of *lectio divina*. Keep in mind each of the four senses of Scripture: historical, analogical, anagogical, and moral. If the group may benefit from hearing about one of your echoes, then record that thought for later.
- 4) If some aspect of your life continues to distract you, converse with God about this distraction from your relationship, thereby giving it over to God.
- 5) At the end, ask God for help with any consequences of your meditation, form a firm resolve to carry those consequences into practice, and give thanks.

Please make your meditation on the following text and any related texts that you feel called to explore:

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases,
his mercies never come to an end;
they are new every morning;
great is your faithfulness.
‘The Lord is my portion,’ says my soul,
‘therefore I will hope in him.’
The Lord is good to those who wait for him,
to the soul that seeks him.

- Lamentations 3:22-25