



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



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Background Notes For A Conference On Lectio Divina

Come O Holy Spirit. Please open our hearts and minds to the message You wish to give us.

Introduction

Lectio divina means reading God, at least in the most provocative, although least precise, translation of the term. I like this playful translation. It highlights that our divine or sacred reading, the true translation, is not merely reading about God but rather an encounter with God. Simply put, lectio is a prayerful opening of oneself to the Word of God and / or the Spirit of God by reading a sacred text. Time set aside for lectio divina can broadly include Bible study at times, especially in a person's early journey with God, for it is sometimes necessary to learn about the faith before delving more deeply into it. However, it is probably more precise to say that periods of lectio can include a mixture of these two types of engagement with the Word of God, one spiritual, the other academic. Lectio is the term that fundamentally refers to a deeper engagement of a text "with the ear of the heart," to borrow a phrase from St. Benedict, in a way that searches to hear God's messages for oneself, both the apparent and hidden ones. It refers to how God wants to use the Word of God to speak to us about our lives, even about the little aspects of our lives, if we let Him.

In practice, it is a slow, sometimes repetitive, reading of the text for its own sake in a non-academic, non-apologetic fashion, in a fashion that is disinterested from reading the text as an achievement. It is a meditative / contemplative exercise that is to serve no other purpose than to listen to God and grow into a closer personal relationship with Him. It is an exercise that will eventually lead to prayer. If one verse is enough to send one into affection for Jesus, meditation, recollection, contrition, thanksgiving, petition, or a simple, quiet contemplation, then the exercise has done its job.

This conference will first walk through some examples of the different ways in which God speaks to us through Holy Scripture, what are commonly referred to as the four senses of Scripture, and then discuss three practical points on how to do lectio.

The Spiritual Senses of Scripture

The spiritual senses outline how and why Scripture can speak to us in many different ways over time. They allow us to meet Christ anew each time we give ourselves to Him through it. Let us now turn to the passage that will serve as the starting point of our example, Matthew 4:4: "It is not on bread alone that man lives but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." If you were listening closely, you heard these words proclaimed to you three weeks ago in the gospel of the first Sunday of Lent. If you didn't think much of them, then you may have missed much of the message that God wanted to give you that day, indeed this entire lent, for this text is the key to the manifold meanings of that day. I have chosen it as my example on how and why to do lectio divina, because it highlights the reason to do so and the three ways by which the Word of God can speak to our hearts through Scripture beyond the historical / literal meaning.



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



The gospel proclamation at Mass made clear that these were the words that Jesus used to resist the devil's temptation of bread at the end of his forty days of fasting in the wilderness after his baptism. However, you may not have known, unless your priest mentioned it, that they are a quote of Deuteronomy 8:2-3, which reads, "Remember the long road by which the Lord your God led you for forty years in the desert, to humble you, to test you and know your inmost heart – whether you would keep his commandments or not. He humbled you, he made you feel hunger, he fed you with manna which neither you nor your ancestors had ever known, to make you understand that human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord." Here we see that Jesus employed the moral of an analogous situation in salvation history against his temptation. By doing so he teaches us that the words of Moses in Deuteronomy were not meant for their historical context alone, but for each person as time continues. Scripture has spiritual meanings beneath the historical one, additional meanings that speaks to our lives, meanings that only the Holy Spirit can make clear to us.

Allegorical Sense

Starting with Origen, the ancient church fathers enumerated three types of spiritual meanings in Scripture: the allegorical, the anagogical, and the tropological. By way of the allegorical sense we understand how the ancient works of salvation history are an allegory for Jesus's own salvific works, how the works of the Old Testament prefigure those of the New Testament. Here are some examples relevant to these passages: the slavery in Egypt is 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. We can go off from here into more sublime meditations and connections on how it is the very Word of God, Jesus Himself, that is the only really fulfilling bread, "the bread of life" (John 6), in the Holy Eucharist, but let us move onto the next way in which the Scriptures speak to us, the anagogical sense.

Anagogical Sense

Texts with an anagogical sense prefigure not the works of redemption in the New Testament but heaven and the next world. It "mounts from spiritual mysteries to certain more sublime heavenly secrets," says St. Cassian (Conferences, 14.VIII), who, by the way, spent his life in joyful meditation and contemplation of the God beyond all telling in these and other ways. This sense is apparent a little further in Deuteronomy 8, in verses 7 to 9, "But the Lord your God is bringing you into a fine country, a land of streams and springs, of waters that well up from the deep in valleys and hills, a land of wheat and barley, of vines, of figs, of pomegranates, a land of olives, of oil, of honey, a land where you will eat bread without stint, where you will want nothing, a land where the stones are iron and where the hills may be quarried for copper." Here we see that the next stage in Israel's progression from slavery and wandering is entry into the Promised Land. To those with "eyes to see" this is an obvious anagogical reference to heaven. I will leave it to you to figure out the further anagogical sense of the phrase "where you will eat bread without stint" in this passage. There are many other beautiful anagogical senses of Scripture, most notably that of the Song of Songs. The book of Esther's spiritual sense is my personal favorite, though, as I am a great devotee of our Lady.



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



These first two spiritual senses cover all of the ways in which Scriptures speaks to us through types, through embedded, hidden signs behind the historical sense of the Bible. The terminology and explication should be new to you, and hopefully enlightening, but the recognition of signs should not, for we are a religion replete with types, signs, and sacraments. First, Jesus's parables demand such an understanding. Second, we sing the Agnus Dei, crying out, "Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, have mercy on us" at every Mass. We do so because the New Testament, most explicitly in Revelations, appropriates the sign of the paschal lamb of Egypt to the God-Man. He was raised up in much the same ways as lambs are slaughtered, slain on the very day the lambs were slain for Passover, and done so to spare us from our sins and the eternal perdition of hell in the same way those paschal lambs saved the Israelites from the great curse of death. It was patently clear to the first Christians that Jesus had fulfilled and brought a new meaning to this ancient sign of salvation that was so dear to the Jewish people. Furthermore, many of the great themes of Scripture are applied to Jesus in the New Testament; He is the living water, prophet, bridegroom, high priest, shepherd, bread from heaven. He is the fulfillment of these signs, of these preludes. Finally, Jesus is also the great mystery hidden behind every sacrament, behind every outward sign instituted by Him to convey grace, to borrow the definition from the Baltimore Catechism. He is really present, in His Body, Blood, Soul, and Divinity, in the way outlined in John 6, every time a priest validly follows His instructions from the Last Supper. God reveals Himself to us through signs and sacraments, and so signification is fundamental to our religion on many levels. Allow yourself to be moved by the Holy Spirit to understand the multiform meanings of the Bible, especially these two forms, for they will help to raise you from prayer focused purely on action to a more contemplative prayer.

Tropological Sense

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" (Mt 4:4). One meaning could be that you need to do *lectio divina*, to listen to the Word of God speaking to you through your Bible, for any number of reasons: to learn the faith, to begin or foster a personal relationship with Jesus, to receive God's help to overcome temptation. It could also remind you that you've forgotten the Word of God that gives life because you have fallen into some sin. I mention this interpretation because the fall of Eve is the Old Testament reading that Holy Church pairs with this gospel on the first Sunday of Lent, rather than the quoted passage from Deuteronomy mentioned earlier. Taken together the Genesis text and this passage could speak to your heart about your specific failings, your besetting sins, those things for which you grasp out of an inappropriate attachment, those things you wish to fill your lives entirely but will only leave you empty without God's word, God's instruction, God's permission, God's presence.

The connections of the moral sense of Scripture are not always logical. Sometimes one word jumps out at you, and that word can prompt an entire sermon within oneself that is completely disconnected from the literal meaning of the text. Sometimes the Spirit will lead you from one text to many all over the Bible, jumping from one concept to another. Often you may have to read and reread the same passage, because the message is that you need to take time to calm down from your distracted or anxious or angry or sad state first by handing those concerns



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



over to the Lord in prayer. If you enter into a text with the intent of listening to the Word of God, He'll speak to you, not audibly but spiritually, and heal you in the most unexpected ways.

The Holy Father and the Magisterium

Let us conclude the theoretical aspect of this conference with two witnesses from authority, first an extended quote from Pope Benedict XVI's new book, Jesus of Nazareth, and then a short quote from the Second Vatican Council:

“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” (Jesus of Nazareth, xix-xx).

“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” (Dei Verbum, 21).

Practical Points

#1: You Need A Guide

My first practical point is that we need a guide to the Bible. The eighth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles puts this necessity to us beautifully; let us listen to part of the story: “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.” (Acts 8:29-31). This need for a guide is ever necessary for every believer, because the faith is fundamentally a gift.

While it is very helpful to have a more experienced person help us with lectio when we are beginning, it is fundamentally necessary that such a guide be a full member of the Body of Christ, the Church, in order to receive the full gift. The mystical Body of Christ, the Church, is that person who must give the faith to another, or in the case of Protestants, give the full interpretation to them. In many ways, I am in part bestowing this faith to each of you now, if



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



necessary, by recommending the official interpretations of the authoritative teaching Church of Christ to you.

So, I bestow on those of you who don't yet know it that our interpretations of the Bible must stay within the bounds of the meanings of the Bible as a whole and within the bounds of Christian Tradition and orthodox doctrine in order to be coherent. With that recommendation, you can now go to those writings as your guide. Anyway, this is probably not news to most of you, but I thought it was worth reminding you at this point when you may launch off into lectio on your own. So, if you are going to swim off into the deep, don't swim off into dangerous waters or places where you can get lost. The devil is all too happy to lure you from those deep waters into immorality, heterodoxy, heresy, schism, and apostasy.

A consideration of official doctrine, all of the relevant passages, the interpretations of those closest to Christ, the early Church, and the great minds of the Church throughout history will lead to a true interpretation for areas where errors can be made. That should not stifle your reading, but enable to explore its depths with greater ease by avoiding certain traps. Our doctrine can develop organically from within the bounds of Biblical teaching and Tradition, but it cannot contradict what we know to be the truth. We must know where personal interpretations and theological speculations can be safely made. Relativism, which either carelessly or ignorantly states that there is a "my truth vs. your truth," is absurd. The principle of non-contradiction is fundamental to all science, knowledge, faith, and rational living.

We must know the truth and live the truth, and sometimes that means changing our lives to conform to a truth beyond our personal opinions. It is a great sin not to search for the true way to live and worship, and yet it is prevalent everywhere. There are thousands of conflicting forms of Christianity. Practically every Protestant has his own personal "truth," which he may or may not realize is his own variation of Luther or Calvin or Cramner or Zwingli's mistakes, fabrications that arose a millennium and a half after the truth had been established. There is truth in each of these Christian communities, to be sure, but confusion and falsehood too. The faith must be logically consistent, and the Catholic faith is the only faith that offers a logically consistent and unchangingly true interpretation of it. We celebrated yesterday the Chair of Peter, the chair that ensures unity and truth in the Body of Christ, the unity Christ prayed for on Holy Thursday. We cannot write our personal agendas into the text, such as the Liberation Theologians do, who write Marxism into it, or the fundamentalists do, who write a convenient, watered-down Christianity by which they listen to no higher authority than themselves. Be true to the faith handed on by the apostles and meticulously scrutinized, defended, and explained by the best minds in Christendom for two thousand years.

The Bible Depends On The Church

In fact, one can only rationally adhere to the faith of the Bible after one adheres to the faith of the teaching Church of Christ, because the Bible cannot be logically accepted as inspired except by the testimony of the Church. It is circular logic to say that you believe the Bible is inspired because it says it is inspired. If you believe in that logic, then I suggest that you never go shopping for a used car or oceanfront property alone. If you believe the Bible is inspired because you find it inspiring, then why not add some of the works of the Saints to the Word of God too? If a work's ability to inspire is the measure of the Word of God, then we will have many different collections of possible Word of God's out there. Indeed, this variation was the case in the 4th century. Many people had collections of holy texts, including the Didache, Shepherd of



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



Hermas, and writings of Pope Clement, and they did not know which ones were the actually inspired texts of the Word of God. The only answer was for the authoritative teaching Church, which preceded the Bible, to establish the truth based on its own authority from Christ. On the most important questions of inspiration and interpretation, the Magisterium, against which the “gates of hell will not prevail,” and only the Magisterium, can speak universally for the Holy Spirit. To believe in the Bible is to believe in the Church first, which we see fits with the nature of the gift of faith and the experience of the first missionary journey by St. Philip, mentioned above. There is a good tract on “Proving Inspiration” at Catholic.com: http://www.catholic.com/library/Proving_Inspiration.asp.

#2: Do Lectio On What Is Most Important

My second practical point is that lectio should be done on what is most important. The most important work is to respond to Jesus’s appeal of boundless, personal love for you. He must draw you and lead you. So you must start with the gospels or New Testament, if you have not been drawn yet in such a way, and you’ll have to continue to include these in some way every time thereafter. Once you have read the whole of the New Testament, then reading the texts for the Sunday or daily Mass is a good place to continue such reading, for it takes the subjective part out of the search for a text. That said, sometimes we just need to hear certain words. However, opening the Bible up randomly can lead to the disposition of trying to force God to answer a question, whereas our disposition should be one of listening to Him. Sometimes lectio takes a great amount of patience, and that waiting on God is a great practice in humility.

You can also split time between listening to the texts of Mass and a little of something else. The guiding principle that lectio should not be academic or apologetic is true in the sense that lectio should not be oriented towards an external goal or self-glorification. However, one can read academic or apologetic works as lectio, if they are what are the most important to one’s own personal growth in relationship with God. Once one is enflamed by God’s love, the next step is to respond to it, and that may take additional study, such as the study of the faith in the Catechism, such as Bible study of important challenges to your faith, such as study of the moral life and the science of the Saints, the spiritual life. The Saints are great mentors and mirrors for us.

If you don’t think through the important questions, those that challenge everything in your lives, including those questions that Pope Benedict calls the neuralgic points, or intense points of pain, between Catholicism and the warped culture of our times, then you will fall into hypocrisy. The same is the case if you go through religion merely to be considered a good person in society or to please your parents or because it is your cultural heritage. You can study these questions in lectio, if you do so with a prayerful heart that is meant to improve your own deficient response to God’s sacrificial love for you. We convert others by converting ourselves, and there is much to be done in that regard for us all before we die.

It is worth noting that the saints and theologians have found the wisdom books of the Old Testament to be of special use to developing self-knowledge. The proverbial sayings are most applicable at first, then Ecclesiastes, and later the Song of Songs for the advanced souls. You may also find writing out your thoughts during lectio to be of use to recollection, but try to listen to God in your writing rather than fall into talking to self in journaling. Many of my lectio sessions have started as mini sermons to myself, and they usually highlight for me the need for certain prayers of contrition and petition.



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



#3: Lectio Enriches Our Communion With God At Mass

From the valley of the second practical point on forming our conscience, let us now ascend to lectio's connection to the "source and summit" of Christian life, Holy Mass. There is no better expression of the love of God than Holy Mass. Lectio Divina is foremost about preparing for the great encounter with God in Holy Mass, both in his Word and in his Sacrament. The better prepared you are by reading and praying about the texts, the more you will get out of Mass. Mass itself is in large part lectio. The psalm is always tied in meaning to the Old Testament reading. The first and second readings of Sundays, Solemnities, and the seasons are linked to the Gospel reading, and often the 1st reading carries one of the spiritual senses for the gospel. Also, if you have what are called proper prayers, such as a chanted introit rather than a processional hymn, or a gospel acclamation, or a verse for communion, then those will highlight some aspect of the meaning of the readings. For instance, the key text of Matthew 4:4 was the gospel acclamation before the gospel on the first Sunday of Lent. Last but certainly not least is that much of the Mass prayers and canon are composed of quotations from Scripture too.

As you grow in prayer and lectio, you will want a quieter, more meditative, more contemplative liturgy; you will want more opportunities for a quiet connection with God. One rough barometer of your proximity to God could be how comfortable you are sitting in quiet alone, both at Mass or home. Frankly, secular instruments and melodies do not promote sacred worship. They are anthropocentric; they focus the attention on exciting the person, rather than worshipping God. They are countersigns that distract one from the transcendent, and they will eventually fail to uplift you.

Lectio & The Liturgy of the Hours

One last connection between lectio and the Liturgy of the Hours must be made. Monks, nuns, priests, sisters, and many lay people continue to meditate on the Word of God in a very special way throughout each day. The Liturgies of the Hours are composed primarily of several psalms, short readings, and prayers, and they are prayed every morning, afternoon, evening, and night. We pray the psalms because they are the prayers of the Word of God. We pray them because we are the mystical Body of Christ on earth, and in doing so we continue to offer Christ's prayers to the Father for the benefit of the whole world. Throughout the world, parts of the mystical Body of Christ unite in these common prayers, and I would encourage you to do so too from time to time. Their liturgical nature makes them the prayers of Jesus to the Father, and so they are not lectio per se, but you may still certainly meditate on the texts in a similar fashion as Jesus prays through you. If you have but a few minutes to devote to the Bible each day, preparing for Mass and praying one part of the Liturgy of the Hours would be an excellent way to do so. Try praying the night prayer, Compline, before going to bed. The psalms are rich with every emotion and type of prayer, and the chanting of them with a religious community brings out that richness even more.



SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



#4: How To Do Lectio

My last practical points concern how to do lectio.

- Start by taking time to recognize yourself in the presence of God
- Take a few minutes, if possible, to center oneself, perhaps by repeating *Veni, Sancte Spiritus* or “God come to my assistance, Lord make haste to help me” (Ps 69:1), which was St. Cassian’s centering prayer, or “Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner,” which is the “Jesus prayer,” or the Hail Mary.
- Pray to the Holy Spirit to grant you inspiration and bring this work to a successful conclusion. Our disposition should be like that of the blind man in the gospel who calls out to Jesus for sight and healing.
- Read the relevant text(s), perhaps twice at first, listening for the point that the Spirit wants to explore
- Follow the Spirit, either into prayer or into related passages
- Place yourself vividly into a passage narrative with your imagination, if you want
- Be patient, pray for help against distractions and persevere in spending the time well
- Ask God for help with any recommended steps for improvement
- Form a firm resolve to carry the Word given to you into practice
- Thank God

Your involvement in lectio will depend greatly on your current level of development and temperament. I would encourage you to set aside 15 minutes each day for lectio or at least to read a verse of Scripture a day. It would probably be good to set aside at least one prolonged period of lectio each week, perhaps on Sunday morning before Church. Lectio works well with the rosary too, for you can read the mystery before the decade.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I want to remind you that there is a personal God who yearns to have a personal relationship, an intimate relationship with you. Jesus Christ yearns to speak to you through His Scriptures. He wants to talk with you, and bestow wisdom and healing to you. He wants to form you into His own image. It is your part to open the door and respond to this love. Get to know Jesus in the Scriptures. You cannot strive after what you don’t know. You must read the Scriptures and the lives and writings of the Saints to learn how to think and act and love as Christ does. It is your duty to bring Him anew to this world, to be the light of the world in your unique vocation, and lectio divina is essential to that work.

“When I discovered your words, and I devoured them, your words were a joy to me, and made my heart rejoice” (Jr 15:16).