



Lectio Divina

BENEDICT'S PRAYER WITH THE SCRIPTURES

Lectio divina is devotional reading of Scripture, followed by meditative consideration of the personal impact of that Scripture, verbal response to the reading and meditation, and contemplative response through active or passive reception.

Lectio divina (“holy reading”), or reading Scripture with the purpose of grounding our prayers, assumes that conversation with God is not only possible, but eagerly expected by God. In providing us with Scripture, God has spoken his word to us for our time, regardless of whether we are well-educated or illiterate (Heb 4:12). When we listen and respond to the Bible, we seek to know the Word made flesh, who is revealed there¹ (1 John 1:1–2). We actively practice our belief that his Holy Spirit will supply the light that we need to understand and receive the Word (John 16:13). Benedict of Nursia believed this and sought to commune with Christ by first trusting that Christ would make himself known (Jer 29:12–14).

Benedict was born in 480 in the Apennine Mountains of what is now Italy. He came from a good family, who sent him to Rome to study, but the licentious behavior of his fellow students, indeed of the entire crumbling Empire, distressed him. Abandoning the scholastic life, he took to the hills to dwell in a cave and to seek Christ as a hermit. Impressed with his devotion, some local monks asked him to become their abbot, which he did reluctantly. However, his governance proved too strict, so they tried to free themselves by poisoning him. The attempt failed to kill him, but it did drive him back to his hermitage.

Nevertheless, his fame continued to spread and others joined him or sent their sons to experience what was then considered the “complete” Christian life: monastic community (Acts 2:44–47). Eventually he established twelve monasteries in the region, each with twelve monks, but his popularity made him the target of local clergy.

At the age of fifty, he left Subiaco and moved halfway to Naples. He and his disciples destroyed the temple of Apollo that they found on Monte Cassino and established a new monastery, where lay people, bishops, and even the king of the Goths sought his counsel. He died (c. 547) shortly after his twin sister, St. Scholastica, who had also followed the monastic way and resided in a convent nearby.²

Benedict’s enduring contribution is the Rule he developed to guide the monks toward complete devotion and holiness. It outlines times of silence, encourages the monastery to be self-sufficient, and gathers the community in worship and prayer throughout the day. In the forty-eighth chapter of the Rule, Benedict states that community members “should have specified periods for manual labor

¹ M. Basil Pennington, *Lectio Divina: Renewing the Ancient Practice of Praying the Scriptures* (New York: Crossroad, 1998), 5–6.

² Timothy Fry, preface to *The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, by Benedict (ed. Timothy Fry; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1982), 9–10.

as well as for prayerful reading.”³ He explains this prayerful reading as cultivating the ability to listen deeply, to hear “with the ear of your heart” (prologue 1).⁴

Later, prayerful reading or *lectio divina* was systematized into four steps: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Reading signified “looking on Holy Scripture with all one’s will and wit,” what we call Bible study. Meditation meant “a studious insearching with the mind to know what was before concealed”; that is, considering how the Scripture may be speaking to you in particular. Prayer proper involved “a devout desiring of the heart to get what is good and avoid what is evil.” This is prayer as we tend to think of it: responding to the Scripture with praise, thanksgiving, confession, or requests. And contemplation concluded the reading with a “lifting up of the heart to God,” sometimes through action.⁵

Some of us start with lifting up our hearts and would just as soon end there. Like the Romans of Benedict’s time, we know how to celebrate, but the stillness of contemplation sounds tedious at first. Prayerful reading provides a habit for receiving the “whole counsel” of God (Acts 20:27 KJV), so that the life of our party becomes the fullness of Christ’s joy (Ps 84:2; John 10:10).

Others of us come to Scripture already in love with its drama and tragedy. *Lectio divina* grounds our imaginations in the Word. Not only do we read the word; *lectio* allows Christ the Word to study us in return (John 1:14). As we discipline our hearts to move back into principles of truth, we discover how the Christian story of suffering and glory takes root in reality and practice (Matt 5:16; Jas 2:22).

Still others, like Benedict, are so driven by correct Scripture-interpretation and obedience that we forget to enjoy the process of listening and responding to Jesus and the people in our communities (Jas 1:23–25). Instead we can comfort ourselves and teach others that obedience to Scripture principles will silence the nagging sense that we lack holiness or devotion. The steps of prayerful reading can shift this right thinking out of the mind into the heart and finally into right action (1 John 5:20).

Practice

1. Find a comfortable place to read and pray. You may wish to designate a particular chair or cushion or organize the space with a candle, a picture, or a favorite mug. Over time, these physical modifications to the environment will cue your mind to begin quieting itself for prayer automatically.
2. Choose a passage. Perhaps you will follow the daily office, reading a designated portion from the Psalms, the Old Testament, an epistle, and a gospel each day. You may stick to a reading guide that takes you through the whole Bible in a year. Or you may use a Bible study guide. If the practice of reading the Bible is new for you, start with the story of Jesus in the Gospels of Mark or Luke.
3. Invite the Lord to be present as you read, to illuminate the text so that you understand it (Col 1:9). *Read* the passage several times, looking for literary clues to its meaning. This is time for Bible study.

³ Benedict, *The Rule of St. Benedict in English* (ed. Timothy Fry; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1982), 69.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁵ “Letter of Dom Guigo the Carthusian to Brother Gervase about the Contemplative Life,” (ed. Fish Eaters), n.p. [cited 12 Jan 2006]. Online: www.fisheaters.com//guigo.html.

What genre is the writing (for example, is it narrative, instructive, apocalyptic, prophetic, poetic)? What is the larger context of the passage? Who are the characters, the readers, the author? What is the plot? What are the main ideas? How does the logical argument flow? What figures of speech do you find? What questions do you have? You may wish to clarify the passage by using the editor's introduction, study notes, cross references, and concordance that are printed in your Bible, or you can open up Bible reference tools like dictionaries, lexicons, and commentaries to help you grasp the basic ideas. However, do not turn your reading into a critical interpretation project. This is time for devotional reading. Save the deep research for later.

4. Once you have the big picture, *meditate* on the passage, allowing the Word to read you (Ps 19:7). Ask the Lord to guide your thoughts as you consider what he might be saying through this Scripture to you in particular.

Reread the passage several times, listening for words or phrases that speak to you. Some people free-write in a journal at this stage, beginning with the words, phrases, or theological themes of the Scripture that stand out to them. Others doodle to help them concentrate, illustrating what comes to mind from the passage, recreating the words in special font or color, or embellishing the printed text. Or you may simply sit, quietly attending to the direction in your mind.

Stay with a phrase that speaks to you for a while. Wait. Your subconscious mind may grasp something that will take your conscious mind a few moments to “hear” and receive.

Savor the phrase. At this stage, avoid analyzing it. This is like tasting your favorite candy. You do not consider the chemical components and how they react with your taste receptors to sense that it tastes good. You simply enjoy the result.

Be aware of potential distractions running through your mind.

- Are these thoughts tugging you away from the phrase?
 - Is there another word or phrase? You may move on to it in a moment. For now, return to the first phrase.
 - Do you wonder whether you are deceiving yourself? How can you know if God is really communicating with you? Be at peace (Ps 16:11–12). God is not a trickster. He is stronger than your self-deceptive tendencies. You may trust him to reveal what you need to hear without leading you down false paths.
 - Is your mind multitasking while it waits? Jot your “to do” list on a separate piece of paper. You can attend to it in a few minutes.
- Are the thoughts that are running through your mind intersecting with your phrase? Perhaps they are the substance of your meditation rather than a path away from it. God brings your subconscious and your conscious thoughts into the light of his word. You need not protect him from your negative or chaotic ideas. You do not need a finished package before you yield yourself to him.⁶

5. When your engagement with the text has settled, turn to the Lord in *prayer*. Perhaps your reading and meditation will lead you to praise God's character or deeds. Maybe something has come to light

⁶ Jesuit Communication Centre, *Sacred Space*, n.p. [cited 13 Jan 2006]. Online: www.sacredspace.ie.

that you wish to confess or for which you want to ask forgiveness. Perhaps you will thank him or petition his help in something or for someone. A phrase from the Scriptures you have been reading may provide the right words or you may speak your own. Now is the time to talk with God (1 Cor 14:15).

6. *Contemplation* involves waiting on the truths you have learned about God and about yourself, but it may include active waiting as well as passive. Perhaps a specific effort will be part of the response to your prayerful reading (Jas 1:23–25). You may need to speak to someone or change a habit. Maybe you will start that in-depth Scripture-analysis now. Or you may share with others the themes and thoughts that arose as you read, meditated, and prayed (Heb 10:24–25). On the other hand, waiting might mean centering in stillness, repeating and returning your mind to a word or phrase that captures the truth you received. Finally, you may simply rest, comforted and empowered through the spiritual exercise for the other activities of the day (Ps 119:52).

Sample the Prayer

Lectio divina need not take a long time if you limit your reading, meditation, prayer proper, and contemplation to one verse of Scripture for each day. Daily practice helps maintain the flow of ideas and the momentum. Rereading yesterday’s verse quickly reminds you what has already transpired in the passage or in your own response. This may be difficult with narrative books of Scripture such as Chronicles or the Gospels, but it works well with shorter prophetic books such as Amos or teaching books such as James.

Practice Together

Consider practicing *lectio divina* as a small group. Designate one person to select the passage and facilitate the group’s study for 10–15 minutes. Once the group understands the passage, get comfortable, close your eyes, and listen as each person takes a turn reading it aloud. Pause for several minutes after each person reads and ponder silently what stood out to you in each one’s reading. When the meditation concludes, join one another in spoken prayer. Perhaps you will pray aloud spontaneously in short bursts, sometimes called “popcorn prayer.” Or perhaps you will pray the Lord’s Prayer in unison or the suffrages responsively (see Liturgical Prayer/Practice/1). Whatever your practice, do not rush, but allow yourselves to be led by the voices around you. Finally, take time to talk about what themes seemed to sound throughout the group, what “word” the group can take away, or what words to individuals have arisen during your group *lectio*.

Consider

1. Have you ever taken a spiritual retreat alone or with your community? What are the advantages of seeking God in a special time of seclusion away from regular life? What may be the benefits of a hermitage or a monastic setting for regular life instead of a short retreat? How would it help one’s prayer life to become complete, holy, and/or devoted? What may be the drawbacks?

2. Doodling and free-writing help focus attention during meditation. Why do you suppose these techniques aid in moving the knowledge you gain from reading into the arena of experience? How else do they change the nature of your meditation? What other tools might you use to aid in waiting on the Scripture?

3. How does the prayer step of *lectio divina* compare with your more spontaneous prayers? How might beginning with Scripture rather than starting with your particular circumstances change the nature of your prayers?

4. What are some advantages of *lectio divina*'s heavy structure? How do you feel about starting with understanding instead of imagination? Do you come away with a different perspective than you started with?

5. How do you think holy reading differs when practiced as a group rather than alone? What inhibits or assists the group in fostering intimacy and trust for this sort of practice? Was it easier for you to concentrate, to hear something during *lectio divina* with the group or alone? Often in holy-reading instructions for groups, the prayer step is omitted. Why might it be important to retain that step before sharing, even though praying aloud to God can be more challenging for some than sharing with other people?

Study Further

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