

Lectio Divina

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Introduction

The authors whose writings inform this article have a specific and demanding notion of what constitutes Lectio Divina. Their understanding is based on research into how monks read the Bible (and related documents) in the early days of monasticism. The authors are convinced that Lectio Divina in this strict sense can be a useful spiritual discipline.

It is also possible to take Lectio Divina in a more general sense to refer to any serious, self-referential reading in which the Christian is listening for the voice of God and ready to follow where God leads. In fact, the high Middle Ages thought of three books which the Christian might read: the book of nature, the book of the Scriptures, and the book of the self. They expected that a beeier's serious and receptive and prayerful and self-referential reading of any of these three books would provoke religious meditation, prayer, Christian action and contemplation. Similarly, the object one's reading could be a video or audio tape, provided that "reading" nurtures one's prayer in a transformative way and leads one to deeper union with God and rest in Him.

Background

Lectio Divina is one of the most troublesome aspects of Benedictine Spirituality for new oblates have to deal with. It causes frustration, consternation and feelings of inadequacy as an oblate. "I don't get it" or perhaps "I can't get it" are frequently heard complaints. The purpose of this piece will be to attempt to de-mystify Lectio Divina, to put it into it's proper perspective and to give a make new oblates comfortable with it. regarding its concepts to new or beginning oblates.

What is Lectio Divina

"Lectio Divina" literally means divine reading. "Lectio" could be either an action (the act or reading) or a object (the material being read.) "Divina" is an adjective, qualifying the word Lectio; it means "divine" or " of God." These definitions, straightforward as they are, create problems in understanding lectio divina.

Authorities disagree as to what body of works should be included in Lectio Divina. The earliest interpretations, and some current ones, see Lectio Divina limited exclusively to Holy Scripture: " The Bible contains the written Word of God. For that reason, the proper and immediate matter for lectio divina can be nothing else than Scripture. The object of lectio (divina) can only be the Word of God contained in the scripture."¹ Generally, however more contemporary thinking has expanded the scope: "I would not like to leave the impression that only the Bible is appropriate for this exercise. Appropriate matter of sacred reading is what expresses the perennial faith of the Church." The author gives as examples Patristic writings, Doctors of the Church, certain mystics, Council texts and encyclicals).²

In any case, while all Lectio Divina is spiritual reading, not all spiritual reading is Lectio Divina. Lectio Divina is a specific form of spiritual reading, with specific objectives, and hopefully, particular results. Current theological or ecclesiological issues, popular tracts and religious commentary on social issues do not fit the purposes of lectio divina. They are important and should in fact be studied by the faithful, but not as f Lectio Divina.

Lectio Divina is not reading in the sense that our society has educated us to understand reading. Our western culture has taught us to consider reading as a purely lineal progression. We start on page 1 and proceed consecutively to "the end. Lectio Divina does in fact begin at the beginning and end at the end, put it presumes much wandering in between. Repetition is critical to Lectio Divina. Back and forth, up and down, savoring and balancing what is presently being read with what was recently read.

History of Lectio Divina

The idea of reading to discover a meaning beyond the literal sense of the biblical textt, was perhaps first articulated by Origen in third century. He used the Greek phrase thea anagnosis to describe scriptural reading for the purpose of finding a hidden message from God. We shall later discuss this idea of a hidden meaning that must be revealed to us; it is central to Lectio Divina.

The earliest cenobitic superiors established Lectio Divina as part of the daily horarium. It was, by the 5th century pretty well an institution of all monasteries. Benedict refers to it extensively in chapter 48 of his Rule. With the decline in monastic life in the and 13th-15th centuries came a concomitant decline in the practice of lectio divina. Lectio Divina owes much of its recent resurgence to Vatican II. "This sacred synod earnestly recommends to all the Christian faithful, especially religious, the assiduous reading of Divine Scripture. . ."3

The Rigor of Lectio Divina

We now come to the heart of the matter in lectio divina. "What am I, as an Oblate, expected to do with regards to Lectio Divina. The short answer is, nothing! Lectio Divina is not one of the items oblates commit themselves to. We commit ourselves to stability and to the support of our chosen community, and to participating, even from a distance, in the prayer life of the community. We do not commit ourselves to the very unique and very demanding discipline of lectio divina. Further we should not try to commit to it until and unless we fully understand its rigors. Certainly we should not consider "Lectio Divina" as some sort of shibboleth, which marks us as "real" oblates. If we wish to commit to it, it seems clear that the rewards will be great, but no great reward comes without discipline and sacrifice and Lectio Divina is no exception.

Lectio Divina is not a technique such as Transcendental Meditation or Centering Prayer. It is a process, and a lengthy and demanding one at that. "Once and for all the notion must be dispensed that lectio consists or can consist of a kind of spiritual pastime, a light, pious recreation. For the ancients and the monastic legislators divine reading is a very serious, very grave, very arduous task."⁴ If these types of cautions are extended to those fully in the monastic life, consider the difficulties in a life with a thousand competing social, professional and familial obligations. All

literature discussing Lectio Divina suggests certain standards, which must be present. A grasp of what is expected, a commitment to the process, a generous allotment of time, and a prior sense of what is to be gained.

A commitment to the process.

Spasmodic periods of a few minutes of spiritual reading may be of very positive value, but it is not Lectio Divina. Lectio Divina as a formal discipline contemplates reading an entire book from beginning to end. Not at one sitting, but from beginning to end. "During this time of Lent each one is to receive a book from the library and is to read the whole of it straight through. These books are to be distributed at the beginning of Lent."⁵ While the bible is clearly a series of separate books, each book is a book unto itself, which as a whole has a particular message to impart. It is that message, not particular episodes that we are trying to capture in Lectio Divina. Obviously, this type of effort takes a fairly serious commitment of time. One author suggests thirty minutes a day every day as a minimum!⁶ At 30 minutes a day the Gospel of John, or the books of the Maccabees are commitments of several months. Such an undertaking would, in addition to whatever other merits may accrue, be a valuable exercise in that premiere of oblate virtues, stability.

A sense of what is to be gained.

One does not engage in Lectio Divina to acquire disinterested, intellectual knowledge. The intent of Lectio Divina is to make the reading of Scripture a prayer, to create a two way street for God and us. Cyprian of Carthage put it perfectly: "Be assiduous in prayer and in reading. In the one you speak to God, in the other God speaks to you." In Lectio Divina we listen to what God is saying to us. We reflect on His message and apply it to our lives and if necessary change the way we live. As has been previously mentioned, Western culture and in particular American culture do not encourage this self-referential attitude in reading. We are taught to wrest specific information from what we are reading. We read with a preconceived notion of what we will find therein, and to do so is almost a fatal flaw in lectio divina. We cannot impose prior expectations, our own particular problems, or the situation at hand on Lectio Divina. It is divine reading; we are to let the Divine deliver the message to us.

Lectio Divina is ideally a four or six-stage process. \Authors usually mention four stages: reading (lectio) that becomes reflection (meditatio) that leads to prayer (oratio) which ultimately becomes contemplative union with God (contemplatio). It is probably more accurate and more congruent with most of our vocations to say that Lectio Divina involves six stages: (i) reading, (ii) reflection, (iii) prayer, in which we give thanks for what we have been shown and ask for insight, for forgiveness, and for help to live what we have read, (iv) action, in which we live it, (v) contemplation, and finally (vi) ministry, in which we share the fruits of Lectio Divina with others. Only when this full cycle is successfully engaged in can we be said to be doing Lectio Divina.

Difficulties in Lectio Divina

Finally, a few comments about some of the difficulties encountered in this form of communing with God.

1. Lack of training and understanding as to what we are trying to accomplish. As has been previously mentioned the phrase is sometimes thought to refer to a task imposed or empowered at oblation. It is a difficult and complex process, and one which demands study and training. All of the books cited in this article will be found to be helpful in this endeavor.
2. Lack of time. Although other forms of prayer may lend them self to short intermittent sessions Lectio Divina does not. It takes committed time and concentration.
3. Disconnect between the messages of the world and the messages of scripture. If we are not able to embrace Christ in our neighbors, our co-workers and, yes, our enemies we will be unable to embrace him in Lectio Divina. Similarly, if we have personal sins unreconciled it will be virtually impossible to whole-heartedly approach God in the manner necessary for Lectio Divina.
4. Inner distractions. We can fairly easily shut ourselves off from the external noise and distractions of the world. More difficult however are the inner distractions, the nagging thought that "I should be doing this or that, or I should be doing something more productive." We need to make an informed choice in these matters: "I am doing something productive and important, I have chosen to do it and it is good."

In summary, this has been a very brief overview of a complex and demanding process. Oblates should consider carefully the question of whether it is a process they can commit to at this point. If the time, effort and commitment to it are not really present it would be a process best deferred.