

Walking Towards God: On Practicing *Lectio divina*

In a new series on *lectio divina*, Séamus O'Connell explores why more than ever, as individuals and communities, we need to make God's word our own



Basic Orientation

Lectio divina seeks to permit those who practice it to hear the Word of God and be nourished by that word. That is a tall order. For André Louf, the great master of prayer, 'the word comes to us in *lectio* to awaken our heart'.¹ This is the heart of *lectio divina*. *Lectio* is about the meeting of the word of God – something more elusive than the Bible – with our lives. In the words of Michael Casey:

Lectio divina is a technique of prayer and a guide to living. It is a means of descending to the level of the heart and of finding God.²

This basic orientation has numerous consequences: *lectio* is about reading the Scriptures as the word of God, it is about prayer, it is about life, it is about hearing what is going on in our depths (listening to our heart) and it is about discovering where God might be in all of this. In *lectio divina* we seek God; we permit ourselves to be found by God (see Gen 3:9–10).

Why bother?

The way that is mapped out in this series is not an altogether easy way. Why bother embarking on such a journey?³ The Church in Ireland finds itself in the midst of one of its greatest ever crises. It is no exaggeration to say that the financial crisis in which the country finds itself is nothing in

comparison to crisis within the Church. The crisis is not new and it is not superficial. However, attempts to address it over the past 10 to 15 years have been both tired and lacking in depth. Frequently, those in positions of leadership are of the opinion that a talk or a day will both address and resolve an issue. There is little awareness of the complexity of what challenges us. Shortly after his ordination as Bishop of Stuttgart in 1989, Walter Kasper wrote his first pastoral letter 'to the Parishes of the Diocese'.⁴ There he offered a stark analysis of the situation in Germany, as it then was, and what needed to be done for the survival of the Church. For Kasper, a significant amount hinged on the conversion of those who consider themselves active members of the church. He wrote:

If we're honest, we have to admit that it is we ourselves who obstruct the faith and its transmission. Without our own personal conversion, all the reforms – even the most necessary and well intentioned – will fail and, without our own spiritual renewal, will end in empty activism. Without listening to the Word, without listening to the will of God, without a spirit of adoration and without constant prayer, there will be no renewal of the church...⁵

Many of the renewal initiatives in Ireland during the last twenty years have been

rushed and lacking in depth. The significant financial and personnel investment they represent notwithstanding, Kasper's prophecy of their ending in 'empty activism' does ring true. There is another dimension: we need to rediscover the character of our mission and ministry. Maybe we can recognise some of ourselves in what Henri Nouwen and others wrote in 1982:

As long as the help we offer to others is motivated primarily by the changes we may accomplish, our service cannot last. When results do not appear, when success is absent, when we are no longer liked or praised for what we do, we lose strength and motivation to continue. When we see nothing but sad, poor, sick, or miserable people who, even after our many attempts to offer help remain sad, poor, sick and miserable, then the only reasonable response is to move away in order to prevent ourselves from becoming cynical or depressed.⁶

The low level of energy in the Irish Church is not simply due to the waves of scandals and the resultant 'credibility deficit'. More deeply, it may be due to a corporate losing sight of what faith is about: witnessing to the closeness of the Kingdom in the proclamation of the gospel and in the service of *all* our sisters and brothers. Nouwen and his companions noted:

Here we are touching the profound spiritual truth that service is an expression of the search for God and not just of the desire to bring about social change.⁷

In many ways this deepest of crises is a call for us to ‘seek the Lord while he may be found’ (Isa 55:6). Returning to Kasper’s pastoral letter, we read, how it is:

fundamental that we permit ourselves to be touched by the Gospel in ways that are ever new and that we ourselves live more decisively and with a greater joy according to the spirit of the Gospel.⁸

Why bother with *lectio divina*?

Ultimately, because it is a way for many who wish ‘to be touched by the Gospel in ways that are ever new,’ because it is a way of ‘seeking the Lord while he may be found,’ and it is a way of discovering the will of God – for ourselves, for our parishes and faith communities, for the Church and for the world as a whole.⁹ Why bother with *lectio*? Because it is a way to reality and surely even one day in reality ‘is better than a thousand elsewhere’. (Ps 84:10)

What Matters

Almost all of my active ministry as a priest has been involved in opening the Scriptures with others. It took me a long time to learn what really mattered: what really matters is how one comes face to face with the sacred text. Nothing, no matter how apparently erudite, learned, or ‘holy’ can replace a person’s own hearing of the word.¹⁰ This is the bread of life (see DV § 21). Who does not need this bread?

NOTES

¹André Louf, *The Cistercian Alternative* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1983) 97. [republished as *The Cistercian Way* (Kalamazoo, Mich.: Cistercian Publications, 1989)]

²Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Ligouri, Miss.: Triumph Books, 1996), vi.

³Some may find it rather somewhat surprising to find rather full notes in a series which is primarily ‘pastoral’ in orientation. However, it is important readers have a sense of where I’m coming from and have the possibility of following a particular line of thought. To cite Michel de Verteuil: ‘Much of our reading remains on the surface both of the [Scripture] passage and of ourselves.’ (*Your Word is a Light for my Steps* [Dublin: Veritas, 1996], 20). To have any chance of real growth in *lectio divina* one needs to go beneath the surface, of the

Scripture, of the method, and of the world (see Luke 5:4). These three things go hand-in-hand.

⁴Walter Kasper, “Die Weitergabes des Glaubens – die Schicksalsfrage der Kirche in unserem Land” (The Handing On of the Faith: the Question of the Future of the Church in our Land). *Kirchliches Amtsblatt Stuttgart* 40/18 (1989), 621–624.

⁵*Ibid.*, 622.

⁶Donald P. McNeill, Douglas A. Morrison and Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Compassion: A Reflection on the Christian Life* (London: DLT, 1982; republished 2008), 31.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Kasper, “Die Weitergabes des Glaubens,” 622.

⁹On this broader, more catholic reading of the Word of God as wisdom for the whole world, see especially de Verteuil, *Your Word is a Light for my Steps*, 22–23.

¹⁰To this spiritual and pastoral truth did Cardinal Martini attribute the success of the *School of the Word* in Milan: ‘The secret of the success of this venture lies in the fact that we do not offer the young people a catechism lesson or even a homily but rather the necessary means for them to put themselves face to face with the text ...’ Address at the Gregorian University, Rome on the twenty-fifth anniversary of *Dei Verbum*.

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