

Walking Towards God: On Practicing *Lectio divina* (2)

In part two of the series, Séamus O'Connell introduced the first two movements of *lectio divina*



2 Practicing Lectio Divina

2.0 The Pre-movement: Asking God's Help – Invoking the Holy Spirit

Since *lectio divina* is about awakening the heart and *lectio* is a reading of God's word in prayer, it is vital that one puts the whole endeavour in God's hands. The importance of this basic disposition in *lectio* is not always appreciated. We place the whole of our *lectio divina* into God's providence by invoking the Holy Spirit, in either a formal or informal prayer.

The prayer could be very simple, something like, *Lord open my heart – that I may hear your word.*¹ As this prayer is very brief, it would be good to repeat it a number of times (say, three). In a group setting, it could be helpful to sing it.²

Alternatively, one could take a longer prayer, like this one developed from a prayer of Enzo Bianchi,

God our Father, source of all light
you have sent your Son into the
world,
to reveal yourself to all your
children.

Send your Spirit upon us now
that we may meet Jesus in the Word
that comes from you.

May we come to know him,
may we come to love him more
deeply

and so be drawn closer
to the happiness of your Kingdom.
Amen.³

This prayer maps out what one would hope to achieve in *lectio*. More directive, such a prayer may be especially valuable for individuals or groups beginning the journey of *lectio* as it keeps before us what *lectio* is about. Whatever prayer is used, it is vital that one prays at all stages of *lectio*: before, during and after. Each phase of *lectio* is different and that variety is part of the strength of *lectio divina*. In his letter to the Romans, Paul observes that 'we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes with sighs too deep for words' (8:26). Ultimately – and this is something that is borne out in the rhythm and movement of *lectio divina* – the heart of prayer is permitting ourselves to be brought into the presence of God and this happens only in the Spirit. It is an illusion to think that we can pray. We cannot. We can only babble. Without the Spirit of God, *lectio divina* is little more than a concatenation of words.⁴

2.1 The First Movement:

Lectio or Reading

In *lectio*, or reading, the first movement of *lectio divina*, we attend to the word. We attend to the word as we would attend to a person who comes to visit us. This is the foundation of *lectio*. In *lectio divina*, the text itself is important. The text is more important than any message that may come from the text. This is a core

value in *lectio divina*. However, this can be very difficult for people to accept.⁵ We feel that the text should be telling us something, should be asking something of us. The text will make its demand – it will call. When we give time to the passage, the call of the text emerges with both gentleness and force. Therefore in *lectio* we attend to the text to hear its call. The call of the text awakens the heart and guides our feet on the way to life (see Luke 1:79).

How do we attend to the text? Initially by *reading* and *savouring* the words. We *feel* the words, we *let* the words *resonate* within us. As we would with a visitor, we *spend time* with the text. In this way we get to know the text. Thus *lectio* is reading and re-reading the text, attending to the text *as it is*, open to its call. Now we may appreciate Cardinal Martini's summation of *lectio*:

What is meant here is reading and re-reading the text. The important points are highlighted, the events, the words, the personalities involved, the emotions, the circumstances, the unfolding of the action. This careful exploration results in many surprising discoveries as we get to know the text.⁶

It is helpful to take up again the ancient practice of reading aloud.⁷ In a group this permits us to read together, to read in communion. On one's own it serves

to alert the reader to the newness, freshness and uniqueness of the text before one's eyes and now on one's lips. *Lectio* is not only about reading the text, but ultimately it is about reading and hearing the text *anew*, hearing it again for the first time.

How long do we read? We read until something resonates within us. This can be a sentence, a phrase, a word or a person within the passage. Something may strike us immediately; generally, it takes a while. It is important that we wait for the word to emerge.⁸

2.2 The Second Movement: Meditatio, Recognition, Reflection or Hearing 'You are the man!' (2 Sam 12:7) is the prophet Nathan's response to the rage of David upon hearing the prophet's tale of how the rich man took and consumed the poor man's lamb (2 Sam 12:1–6). The word of the prophet brings the king to recognise what he has done. This recognition leads to David's repentance, his response to what he has done. Note the sequence: hearing, recognition, response. David *hears* the story, he comes to recognise himself in it, he seeks an appropriate response. This is precisely what goes on in the middle of *lectio divina*: each person comes to *hear* the text and in that hearing are the beginnings of a recognition. Classically, this is termed *meditatio*. The *meditatio* flows out of the *lectio*.⁹ We now see the type of reading we are doing: for narratives, we might say it is a reading *towards* recognition; for biblical poetry (e.g. in the Psalms), we might describe it as reading *towards* resonance.

A further contrast may be helpful: in *lectio* we read the word, in *meditatio* we read our lives; we read our lives illuminated by the word. The word becomes 'a lamp for [our] steps and a light for [our] path' (Ps 119:105). That recognition or resonance is the foundation of a real response. The seriousness of what is involved is captured by Michael Casey when he observes that 'the only prayer with any value is one that rises from the heart in response to the realities of life'.¹⁰ Here we touch the power of *lectio divina*: the Scriptures permit us to hear what is going on in our lives; in *lectio* the Spirit opens the Scriptures to us so that we recognise the realities of our lives.

Since this recognition brings us to the truth of our lives, it is both the key step and the most difficult step. Most *lectio* falters at this point. This is understandable: *meditatio* involves coming to terms with our own lives

and frequently we do not know how to do this well. So how does one proceed? Maybe one of the best ways to proceed is by reading the text in a way which brings us home to ourselves. We call this *homecoming* reading. It is a reading which seeks to build up, which helps us to come to terms with who we are and with the situations in which we find ourselves. Any reading of a text like the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Luke 15:11–32) will recognise the younger son's impetuosity (v. 12), his coming to himself (v. 17), his discovery of humility (v. 18 and v. 21), the father's humility in dividing his property (v. 12), his patience with both his sons, his welcome of the returned son (v. 20), his wisdom (vv. 31–32), the elder son's resentment (v. 28) ... and many more aspects of the story. A homecoming reading of this story will give thanks for the younger son's coming to himself, for his discovery of humility, for the father's patience and wisdom, it will understand and accept the elder son's resentment. A homecoming reading will avoid saying: we *should not* have asked for our share of the inheritance like the younger son did, we *should* be patient like the father, we *should not* be resentful like the elder son. Such responses alienate the readers both from the text and from the realities of their lives. They destroy; they make people less than what they truly are and can be.

NOTES

¹ In a group setting this would become, Lord, open our hearts – that we may hear your word.

² The following classic melody, F-FF-Ab-G—F-F-F-Eb-C, would work very well. The simpler the better. Some people object that song has no place in *lectio*! However, if we remember that *lectio* seeks to engage the whole person – mind and heart, body and soul – then everything that serves that response is to be welcomed. *Lectio*, like all prayer, is making space for what God will do and is doing.

³ The original form of this prayer is to be found in Enzo Bianchi, *Praying the Word* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1998), 75. Bianchi's is one of the great introductions to *lectio divina*; significantly it is the introduction recommended by Cardinal Martini; see Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, *Se retrouver soi-même: à la recherche de soi à travers les évangiles* (Paris: Brepols, 1997), 231.

⁴ Another model for this prayer of disposition is offered by Michael Casey:

O God of all the living.
When your people were hungry you fed them with manna.
Give us this day our daily bread
and may our trust in your providence
never falter.

We ask this through Christ our Lord.

(*Sacred Reading*, 85).

⁵ One of the great ironies in Christianity is that many people who claim that their faith is built upon the Bible are not really interested in the Bible at all! Just because people say that the Bible is the foundation of their faith, and because they quote certain biblical texts, does not mean that the Word of God is being sought or listened to. Often dogmas or doctrines simply silence what God might seek to say in his word which is 'to place a construct of reason, in this case theological reason, over the actual text of Scripture.' [Paul J. Achtemeier, *Inspiration and Authority* (2d ed.; Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1999), 59]. The approach is found in all denominations. We end up proof-texting: having the Scripture merely reinforce what we already know and hold. The difficulty is not new: having been challenged by the Pharisees over his apparent laxity in the observance of rabbinic food laws, Jesus retorted, 'You have a fine way of rejecting the commandment of God, in order to keep your tradition!' (Mark 7:9). Learning and practicing an openness to the text is essential to having the living word of a living Lord. The opposite – an unmoving, rigid, and ultimately dead word, from a dead Lord – bears little fruit and can never bring us to life.

⁶ Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini in S. Panimolle (ed.), *Like the Deer that Yearns* (Slough: St Paul's Publications, 1990); [Republished Petersham, Mass.: St Bede's Publications, 2006], 107.

⁷ Scripture reading for both early Jews and early Christians was reading aloud. In an address to the Catholic Biblical Association of America in August 2002, the late David Noel Freedman observed 'Bible reading is never silent. Bible reading means reading aloud – it is proclamation.' The sense of Bible reading underlined by this great Jewish Old Testament scholar finds resonance with the deepest traditions of Bible reading in Western and Eastern Christianity.

⁸ It behoves all readers of the text to slow down. This is as valid for scholars as for readers in a parish prayer group. As all readers are captive to some agenda or other, slowing down helps us to identify and move beyond these agendas. Reading while attending to the details and discontinuities of the text alerts us to our blindspots. Passing quickly over the difficult parts of a passage blocks the real possibilities that the passage offers us. Learning to slow down lies at the heart of all serious reading of Scripture—both for prayer and for study.

⁹ Note the verb: *flows*. The *meditatio* cannot be forced. A forced *meditatio* is a false *meditatio*. It is a fabrication of our will and blocks the deeper call of the word.

¹⁰ Casey, *Toward God*, 91.

Séamus O'Connell
Professor of Sacred Scripture
St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co Kildare