

Lectio divina

Background of *lectio divina*

Lectio divina derives from the prayerful reading of Benedictine monastic communities, first established by St Benedict of Nursia in the sixth century. In the Rule he wrote to govern the lives of the monasteries he had founded, St Benedict stipulated that monks should have specified times both for manual labour and for *lectio divina*, ‘holy reading’.

Now, *lectio divina* (‘holy reading’) is, as the name suggests, a type of reading, but it’s very different from most of the ways we read things today. Nowadays we’re surrounded by so much text, that it’s a very useful skill to be able to skim-read and to be able to extract what it is we want quickly. In Cambridge I was often given four or five days to read for and write an essay of about 2,000 words, so I got into the habit of racing through texts keeping an eye out for the things I hoped to find there. You couldn’t afford to dwell on anything—you had to keep moving, as you had five other books to do the same thing with, all by teatime tomorrow!

But whether or not we’ve been students, we’re all familiar with this way of reading. We rush through a recipe because we need to go shopping and buy the ingredients, we rush through a novel because it’s really good and we want to know what’s going to happen next, we rush through a Bible reading before the service just to make sure there are no difficult names in it that are going to trip us up.

In all these cases, we know what we want to get out of a text—we know what we’re reading it for, and what we want to take away from it. We’re consuming the text, *using* it. With the Bible it should be different. We call the Bible the ‘Word of God’, and whatever we think this means for how it came to be written and the literal truth of the things written in it, it certainly means that we think God speaks to us through it. So when we read the Bible in *lectio divina*, we read it while *listening*, and to help this happen, we read it *slowly*, ready to stop and pay attention to anything that needs closer consideration.

This way of reading the Bible makes a very important presupposition: when we do *lectio divina* we presuppose that the Bible contains a message for *me*. Not a message for people in general, not a message for my congregation, not a message for someone I know who really needs to hear this—a message for me. God addresses us personally through the Bible.

How it's done

Lectio divina is basically prayerful engagement with the text of the Bible. For the purposes of explanation, and for beginners, it is split into four components often known by their Latin names: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*.

Lectio means reading, and this stage is just that—but *slow* reading. You read the text slowly, ideally out loud, paying attention to *all* of it, not trying to consume it. You can say that in *lectio* we are not going to the text to get something out of it, but we're giving the text the opportunity to get something out of us.

The second stage, *meditatio* or meditation, is when you focus on a word or phrase or verse that strikes you, and this involves reading the text again. If you're doing it on your own, you can actually stop reading when something strikes you, staying with that word or phrase, but in a group you have to wait until the whole passage has been read, and then you can go back on your own and spend some time with the word or phrase. A word or phrase can strike you in many ways—it can cause you to feel joy, or sorrow, or guilt, or great comfort. Whatever it is, give the phrase a real chance to have that effect on you, turning it over and over in your heart, while trying not to *think* too much about it. Feel free to take notes or draw pictures, or anything that helps you to explore what God is saying to you.

In the third stage, *oratio* or prayer, we begin to respond. In this stage you can respond to God however you like. Whatever God has prompted in you through the word or phrase that caught your attention, take it to God. You might want to thank him, to tell him something, to confess something, or just to sit with him. This stage is entirely up to you.

And finally, in the fourth stage, *contemplatio* or contemplation, we review. Absorb what you have learnt about God and yourself—and this might mean that you are prompted to action. You might, for example, have read one of John the Baptist's fiery sermons and feel you have to go and set up a direct debit to a charity right now! Or it might be a more gentle resolve to be more thankful, or you might have realized in a new way that God loves you.