
Lectio Divina: Mysticism of the Text

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One of the most ancient of spiritual practices is the focused recitation or reading of sacred texts. In the monastic traditions of Christianity, *lectio divina* (Latin, divine reading) is a method of mindfulness in which God is encountered through the words of Scripture. Composed of four spiritual stages or processes—lectio, meditatio, oratio, and contemplatio—the themes of reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating share a commonality with spiritual exercises found in many of the world's religions. When words are read slowly and sacramentally, when they are allowed to come inside body and soul, they become food nourishing the spirit.

In a Christian context, *lectio divina* is an ancient discipline of contemplation. Probably first practiced by the desert monks, sacred reading becomes ritualized in St. Benedict's rule for religious. Originally a way of descending to the level of the heart to find God, *lectio divina* fosters an attentive listening that is its own form of prayer. One begins by approaching Scripture with reverence, realizing the divine Word in and through words of the text. Christians call upon the Holy Spirit to help them hear what God is saying to them in the practice of reverential reading. With one word or phrase, they listen for the divine speaking through the text for a period of time—ten minutes, a half hour. At the end of the time, a word or phrase is chosen that has spoken to the reader, and it is carried in one's heart through the day. The period is completed with a closing prayer of thanksgiving, reverence, or awe.

Unlike discursive reading, where we seek knowledge and understanding, *lectio divina* is reading to experience the divine presence. In this sense, it is a mysticism of the text. In and through the text, we come face to face with the Spirit. Through slowly savoring each reading, we allow words to penetrate our hearts and fill us with wisdom and love. Sometimes we can be pulled clean out of our ordinary state of mind. We may awaken to new truths or insights, suffer compunction or shame, or be forgiven and bathed in light. By whatever means, in *lectio divina* communion occurs through surrender and rest. We do not rush reading, trying to find the thesis, underlying cause, or critical analysis. We stop. We remain still in the presence of mystery.

In Christian monasticism, this is the way of being Christ's disciple. Each day in receiving God's word, the monk becomes the mind of Christ, to see the world as God sees, to love the world as God loves. The reading itself becomes a form of practice. Christians, lay and religious, find ways to ritualize time for *lectio divina*. Lay practitioners will find a special time of day, perhaps right before going to sleep, or in the morning at breakfast with one's spouse or family. Monastics reserve special times of the day, often several hours, for hearing the divine word. As the practice becomes more systematic and routine, spiritual energies reform the whole self.

While in Christianity *lectio divina* is undertaken in relation to Biblical scripture, any sacred text can be read with the same spirit of divine reading. In the religious traditions of Southeast Asia, millions of Hindus daily recite the Bhagavad Gita, Taoists and many others around the world consult the I Ching for wisdom and guidance, and Jews invoke the blessed Torah as God's message to the people. In the recitation of sacred stories, scriptures, and chants, language is not just textual but fully experiential—the handing down of wisdom through the voice, reciting over and over until the sound of the words becomes the heartbeat of the soul.

In a broader context, *lectio divina* is a method-less method of reading the Divine in the faces of human companions, in the book of nature, and in the everyday encounters of life. It is a quality of heart that in piercing through appearances is able

to listen with rapt attention for the spirit to be revealed. Often our experience of each other is limited and false. We approach friends, colleagues, and family with personal histories, formed opinions, and blind assumptions. Lectio divina reminds us to slow down and experience awe, to listen for the spirit struggling to speak through the text of each other's lives. In this way, we become attuned to listening for the divine in every encounter—in a mother's joy of birth, a child's cry of hunger, or a soldier's prayer of peace. This form of daily divine reading is one of the most holy of spiritual practices and one of the most difficult to achieve. Far easier to meditate in a quiet room undistracted by noise, or to savor scripture in the comfort of one's living room.

Thus, the completion or fullness of the whole practice of *lectio divina* is contemplation and action, intimacy with the Divine in this world. It is coming to rest in God's presence, passing beyond words to the gateless path of truth. In this sense, lectio divina functions as a mysticism of the text, centering the practitioner in the emptiness that animates every coming to speech. It is communion in silence, between the Silence of scripture and the silence of the one who reads.

~Beverly Lanzetta

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