

Lectio Divina

Part 10 – Elements of *Lectio*

By Fr Steele Hartmann OCSO

While to speak of *Lectio* it is useful to break it up into component parts, it is usually experienced as an organic whole — usually we just sit with Scriptures and meet the Lord there in his Word. How much time it takes before we begin to respond depends ... it just happens when it does. The whole process, given enough time, can be present in each and every period of *Lectio*: as we listen, a Word strikes us (*Lectio*); we let it reverberate within us, opening us, reshaping us (*meditatio*); this calls forth a response (*oratio*); finally we rest in the Reality to which it leads us (*contemplatio*). It is not meant to be steps:1,2,3,4, ... prayer will come when it does. Some seem to move easily between the different 'levels', while others may take a lifetime to get there. At this moment we may not all be capable of contemplation, but it can and will lead all to contemplation. Contemplation is the aim of *lectio*.

1. *lectio*/reading (listening)

First we gather with a text to receive a word, we listen to God in his Word. God speaks first, and we listen. Because God sets the agenda through the text, something external to me, it is not an exercise in naval gazing where I simply indulge my own thoughts. *Lectio* is a listening — letting God speak first, and letting that word e/affect me. We do not speak first — we do not come looking for that which supports our own already existing ideals and concepts, but instead allow these to be challenged. We come seeking God, himself and nothing less, the experience of the living God present, to be with him and let him be with us — as he wishes to be with us. We come as we are today, with what is going on in our world today.

Lectio Is not an exercise in speed-reading, so we do not just skim to pick out the essentials. Rather, *Lectio* is a slow savouring of the words, where we allow the text to trigger memories/associations. The emphasis is on slow. *Lectio* is a way of spending time with God's revealed word — it involves *reflection* on the meaning, applying it to one's own life situation, and a willingness to let it lead us to prayer.

Lectio is a very slow and repetitious reading. We start at the beginning and end at the end, but in between there is much meandering. Thus we need to be prepared to stay with a particular book for a long time; it will be our constant companion for a major part of our journey. (It took me about eight years to read St Paul's Letter to the Romans !) We must beware a boredom that says, "I'm getting nowhere." We need to remind ourselves that our goal is not to get to the end of the book, but prayer; the book is but a vehicle.

2. Meditation (hearing)

Here we 'Hold' the Word (like chewing the cud) — perhaps repeating it over and over, either verbally or in the mind, till it 'descends into the heart.' This is to allow the Word to break us open and reform us, as in make us over/remake us. It can be helpful here to ask questions when we don't understand what is said. We don't always immediately grasp what the word is saying to us, especially if it is at odds with our habitual way of perceiving things. An initial response, when we don't understand, is just to persevere in it, not lightly dismissing anything just because it doesn't make sense/is contradictory/whatever — leave it sit there as a question; we will eventually get an answer/gain insight.

A danger, though, is in getting caught up in our own thoughts, desires and insights. *Lectio* can be very satisfying, leading us to wonderful ideas

and inspirations and great insights. But if we're not willing to leave these, we will not get to contemplation. *Lectio* is not about thoughts, ideas and insights, but about being with the Lord. Rather, what we are looking/listening for here is any response in us, the result of our affective embrace of the Word. We need to let our feeling get involved; *Lectio* is more than just intellectual stimulation. We are meeting with God; we need feeling to relate — with anyone and so with God. It is this which calls forth our response, which we want to share as we move into prayer.

3. Oration (responding)

Our meditation will call forth a response: thanksgiving, praise, petition, repentance, adoration. This is our prayer. Writing out our prayer may be useful to use as a closing prayer, to take with us for the rest of the day to recall our experience in *Lectio*.

As we read, we need to be attentive to any movement in our heart — don't worry about /be afraid of what or where these may lead, but let the prayer come, whatever it might be. The Word may speak directly to our situation producing feelings of compunction — speak from here. Or the Word may evoke a feeling — sit with it till you become conscious of what is your desire and offer this. Or our reading may inspire in us a desire for reform/greater endeavour — pray this.

Note: we pray all the way through this process — when we open our book, settle our minds, as we read and ponder. Here we mean the particular prayer to which our *Lectio* now leads us. *Lectio* (the reading part) is not an exercise in itself — it's supposed to lead to prayer. If no prayer comes, perhaps we are going through a dry period, then we can insert a prayer — e.g., perhaps by seeing each verse as a prayer

addressed to God and coming out of our life. This will help us engage/get back in touch with our desire for prayer.

4. Contemplation (resting)

Lectio leads us to contemplation, by way of meditation and prayer. This is just a 'being with' the Lord, after all the emotion is spent, a sitting there together in silence with no need to say anything, just abiding with God in his Temple. This is union with God, but is often accompanied by or experienced/felt as a union with all creation. *Lectio* leads to contemplation, but in so doing it becomes an initiation into solidarity with all humanity. Thus can we understand how our encounter with the Word leads us to reform our deeds. This is the fruit/flowering of *Lectio* — where, in our prayer, we become the subject of Christ's prayer (this is what he wants us to do/what we are led to want to do); where, In our living, Christ, with whom we are now one, becomes the do-er of our actions (these are but two sides of the one coin).

Note: not all *Lectio* periods will lead to this. For some this might come readily and often; for others it might take a whole lifetime — but it will happen.