

Lectio Divina

Part 9 – *Lectio*: A Simple Structure

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1. Come into the Presence and Call upon the Holy Spirit.

Just as we need a time and a place to work, sleep, eat, celebrate, play, meet and talk with others, so also we need a time and a place for things of the spirit and for prayer. External circumstances will impact on our reading. If, for example, we do *Lectio* where we ordinarily work, memories of what we have done/still have to do may flow in to distract us. We need in some way to separate ourselves from the realm of the ordinary — If we can, a separate place for prayer is good. A distinct time for prayer is also good.

Prayer time is the easiest to put off; we need to give it a priority, make it happen — this IS a matter of choice. We have many things that claim our attention each day, often these can be of great importance. So we need to give an importance to some time for ourselves. Our prayer time calls for a privacy that does not readily admit others and other distractions, where we are out of touch. Privacy is essential, for in prayer we need to be our true self in all humility and honesty (strengths AND weaknesses). We need to create this private place. In this we will need the cooperation of others, that they respect that we are generally not available at this time.

Noise and interruptions do disturb. What we need is a place of peace and quiet. Sometimes we can't do anything about all these things, and so we will have to read here in this place/make most of what can do. But if we can, we need to claim a place of peace, quiet and privacy where we can be alone with God. In this place we need good lighting — this is a time of reading; we need to be able to read with ease, that the physical task of reading does not intrude on the time. And posture is important — If pray in an armchair, we may relax too much; if we pray in one that is too uncomfortable, this will become the focus of our attention, and not prayer; we need a good chair. It needs to be well aired, too — too stuffy or too warm and we will find ourselves becoming drowsy; too cold and that will be all we can think of.

It can be helpful to create/build/make a sacred space and enter it by ritual — doing something that puts distance between you and the 'world' (with all its tasks that belong to another time). It can be anything: perhaps just a simple prayer to start with, or something more elaborate, or it could even be going off for a walk alone. The aim is to make a place where we can be with the Lord, where we are not tugged by our passions, emotion, desires (this was what was behind the flight into the desert: to be free to do what they wanted, namely, be with God).

Perhaps we might ...

The Bible bespeaks a REAL presence, a place where we can encounter the living God whenever we will. We ought to approach it with reverence. Perhaps we might enthrone the Word on a bookstand, rather than just having it on the shelf with other books. We might pick it up with real sense of awe and wonder (perhaps with a kiss), for it is the

Word of God, incarnate in Scripture. Such reverence helps propel us to silence, enabling us to listen. It is a recognition that we are in the presence of something greater than ourselves, before whom we should be silent. Reverence will help us welcome the Word. Reverence will help safeguard the seriousness of what we are about and so help us give *Lectio* a priority.

Perhaps we might stand or kneel to begin, remaining in that position till we begin to read the Word and before sitting to continue *Lectio*. A mat on the floor might help mark out a space. Lighting a candle, using icons or other sacred symbols may help. Putting all these things out as part of a ritual in setting up helps focus the mind, put aside our other task. Conversely, putting all these things away after may help to return us and the space to normal.

As part of ritual entry into sacred space, it is helpful to begin by making explicit our desire to meet God, and so making our *Lectio* become part of our search for God. This might be done via a favourite/familiar prayer, or one we compose. It is good to have some fixed prayer to start with, one that asks for help, perhaps a prayer invoking the Holy Spirit — it was the Holy Spirit that inspired the sacred authors; it is the Holy Spirit who will teach us and remind us of all that Jesus has said. We might ask the Holy Spirit to make the sacred text be a living communication with the Lord, and to help us understand what the Lord wants us to hear.

2. Listen to the Lord speaking through the Sacred Text.

Lectio is not an exercise in reading. It is best to fix a duration, set a time period for *Lectio*, rather than set a fixed amount of reading to be done. Set a time that is do-able/realistic each day, that fits in easily to our daily routine. If it's not too long we are more likely to do it each day and be faithful to a daily encounter. 5 minutes done each day is better than a plan to devote great slabs of time, which we don't have — our *Lectio* will eventually develop its own momentum and bring with it a desire for more as we become more proficient at it. It is better to fix a set time each day — this avoids having to decide each day when we can fit it in, and it becomes part of the auto-pilot of our daily routine. Routine has a bad press, but it actually makes life simpler.

Good habits are built up by a repetition of good acts; it is easier to do good once a habit is established. A good routine is just a set of good habits: a routine makes them happen. Often the beginning of the day is preferred, before we are beset by the day's distractions. In this way we don't have to rid ourselves of them before we start. It is good to be disciplined about the length of time. We should beware the temptation to sit longer when we are having a 'good' time in prayer, just as we need to stick at it where it is not going so well and all seems dry. All this calls for a daily asceticism, for self-discipline.

We have to set aside some time each day; we have to "make time", as opposed to "find time". We have to establish priorities, giving *Lectio* a priority. We have to be willing to let go all our doing for a while. *Lectio* needs a solid piece of time each day; a minimum of half an hour a day is best. (We won't be able to do this every day, but we must be able to

say that this is our habit.) This requires a sustained commitment over time, and this requires effort. In this our own laziness can undermine us through an unwillingness to make the effort to do *Lectio*. Then, we have to manage our thoughts, passions, desires so as to be free for things of the spirit. We need a stillness to receive God's Word. All this flows from our decision to sit with the Lord for this time. It requires sustained effort, but it helps produce a certain openness and sense of leisure, both essential to *Lectio*.

The process in *Lectio* is simple: God speaks and we listen, then we respond. As we read we need an affective embrace of the Word; we need to be attentive to any movement of the heart. For whatever reason a certain word or phrase will catch our attention: it will not be lights flashing and trumpets sounding, but just some mere flicker of interest — it is this we must pause over. It may be the first word we read that comes alive for us. It is this we need sit with and then respond to. We need not worry about the rest of the text; it will be there tomorrow! There is no need to push on. We show our reverence for the text by being willing to sit and listen, to figure out what it is saying as opposed to what we want/would like it to say; we need to ponder, we need to be prepared to sit with what might unsettle, in spirit of trust.

Lectio speaks to my present situation. if I'm emotional, I will see only that emotion. The Lord speaks to us where we are today. Thus the same Word can speak to us very differently on different days. Then, if I'm a newcomer/less experienced to *Lectio* I will see little (though it may be more dramatic), less than someone more experienced. Scripture accommodates to our level of perception. This, too, will change over time, so that, in time, we will see differently, see more (hopefully); the

vision gets grander. So, we may read and re-read a book in *Lectio*; repetition/'overexposure' is not a problem.

For as we come again to the Scriptures, we are not the same; we grow and change, we see/read/hear with new eyes/ears and so get a different message (which we would not get unless we come by it again). There is no "one" meaning of/in Scripture; it speaks of the mystery of God. There is a literal level, in which we can speak of its literal meaning; but there are also other levels of meaning. We must be mindful that the text is not history; it is more than that. We must beware the short-sightedness of literalism, and stay open to other levels of meaning. We have to let the Spirit speak, though there is need for discernment for not all spirits are of God. We need to give ourselves some freedom to move beyond the literal level allowing the Spirit to speak/inspire — but always with commonsense, integrity, prudence and humility. We must not be fearful of making mistakes; this will limit inspiration — always mindful that the Spirit that moved the sacred authors is also the same Spirit at work in us.

... What I do:

I usually try to have about four pages on the go. Why four? Four pages is about as much as I can remember as a block. I do not try to memorise the text just to be able to remember it as such, but to free me from the text so that I don't really have to read it, the text being there more as a prompt (thus I don't have to be able to recite it by heart either). Also, if nothing 'happens' during my prayer time, four pages is enough to fill my prayer time (I usually try to do about an hour early in the morning) as I slowly work my way through the pages. At the end of the four pages I

usually add another sentence, having left off a sentence at the beginning. In this way there is a slow progress being made through the book I am reading, which at the moment is Paul's Letter to the Galatians.

As I read, some word or phrase might catch my interest — and it can be the slightest thing, so that you have to be attentive; if you're not, then you just pass over and nothing happens. When something catches my eye, I usually write it down in my journal; I pray with a pen. This adds action/doing to sight in my experience of the Word, and slows down my reading even further, and externalises it — it's not all just happening in my head. Usually by the time I have written down the sentence, another piece of Scripture comes to mind (this gets better as you become more familiar with Scripture); I write this down, too. I keep going in this way until I respond; I write this down, too. It's important to remember that my *Lectio*/reading is prayer; it is not Scripture study. The pieces of Scripture I rub together might have nothing to do with one another from an exegetical point of view, but that's OK — it's MY prayer; it's me and God speaking. I find this process, which I find quite 'conversational, usually leads me to my prayer.

I find I can end up in some rather interesting/surprising places, which I didn't know I wanted to pray about, and occasionally gain some significant insights; it really is a great way to pray. This process can take some time (and I can be surprised at how much time has passed without my noticing), so that I find I do not always get to the end of my four pages. That's OK. I can have another go tomorrow. Sometime it can take a long time (don't be in a hurry to get to the end of the book) before I get to add the next sentence onto my reading. That, too, is OK; it just means that I keep reading the same material over and again, till I

have prayed it out — the monks of old used refer to *Lectio* as *rumenatio*, after what cows do when they chew their cud, chewing it over and over until there is no more goodness to be got out of it.

At other times nothing much may seem to happen and I can find myself making 'progress' through the book — perhaps a reminded to be more attentive as I read. I find this is a great way to open yourself to God's Word and take it into yourself so that it becomes part of you (the Word Incarnate, so to speak!).

3. End with a prayer.

It is good to end with a prayer. This will help to bring our session to a close, help us transit back to ordinary time/space. We might say the Lord's Prayer, or a psalm of thanksgiving, or a prayer based on what we have read, or it might be a prayer of thanks for his presence with us and for his 'Word' today. It is good to take our 'Word' from *Lectio* with us, repeating it over and over, letting it influence our day and making the Lord present during the whole of our day. To listen means to hear and obey: our aim is to put what we read into practice. We need to let it call and challenge us, and let ourselves be converted. Or, if no Word come for us, we may need to choose a Word to take with us for the day, and hopefully it will work its stuff during the day, i.e., lead us to prayer and contemplation.