

# Novitiate Module

Lay Fraternities of St. Dominic

2012

Province of St. Joseph

## PRAYER -

### People of The Word Lectio Divina

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#### I. Introduction

In his apostolic letter, “Novo Millennio Ineunte,” Pope John Paul II reminds bishops, clergy and lay people of the old kind of christian prayer – listening to the Word. “It is especially necessary that listening to the word of God should become a life-giving encounter, in the ancient and ever valid tradition of Lectio Divina, which draws from the biblical text the living word which questions, directs and shapes our lives.”<sup>1</sup>

Lectio Divina is much more than a mere spiritual reading. Lectio is a method of prayer based upon an in-depth reading and meditation of Sacred Scripture. This prayer should nourish our Dominican life of faith, hope, and charity through a living contact with our Lord Jesus Christ, as He is made known to us through His Word. He is the one Word, in Whom the Father has said all that He is in Himself and through Whom He has created all things. As Jesus is the Word of the Father made flesh in the womb of the Blessed Virgin by the power of the Holy Spirit, so Scripture is the same Word become writing on the pages of a book by the power of the Holy Spirit working through the minds of the human authors.

Lectio is a holistic way of prayer, which disposes, opens, and informs us for the gift of contemplation God waits to give, by leading us to a meeting place with Him in our deepest center, His life giving dwelling place.<sup>2</sup>

Lectio Divina is a way of prayer and because prayer is always a very personal and intimate activity, Lectio will itself take on a very personal character proper to each person who makes use of this method. For this reason, each person must discover the way that works for him or her. The needs of different individuals are different and indeed, the needs even of the same individual are different at different times of his or her life.

What does word the “lectio” mean? The Latin word lectio in its first sense means a “teaching,” a “lesson.” In a second sense, lectio can also signify a text or a group of texts transmitting this teaching. Finally, in a still more derived and later sense, lectio can also mean “reading.”<sup>3</sup>

#### II. The Lectio Divina

The Scriptures need to be read and understood in the same spirit in which they were written. “You will never enter into Paul’s meaning until by constant application to reading him and by giving yourself to meditation you have imbibed his spirit. You will never understand David until by experience you have made the very sentiments of the psalms your own. And that applies to all Scripture. There is the same gulf between attentive study and mere reading as there is between

friendship and acquaintance with a passing guest, between boon companionship and chance meeting” – William of St. Thierry said.<sup>4</sup>

The way of Lectio Divina can be divided into four fundamental steps: *Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio and Contemplatio*. Of these steps the first three pertain to the efforts that we must make while the last refers to either the natural fruit of our labors, or a special gift of God, that comes independent of our labor, but which our efforts prepare us to receive. The two hinges of the whole method are the *Lectio* through which God speaks to us, and the *Oratio* through which we speak to God. It is through these two-steps that the whole of Lectio Divina becomes a dialogue of prayer, and conversation with our Lord.

The *Meditatio*, however, is the decisive step whereby, by pondering the words of God received into our hearts through the reading, we make ready the response we give God in prayer. We speak to God when we pray with love. We hear God when we read His Word with faith.

The practice of Lectio requires a certain discipline whereby we devote a definite amount of time each day, preferably the same time, to practice. We may not always feel like practicing Lectio Divina. Sometimes the practice may seem to be a matter of all work with no fruit, no renewal energies. At other times, it may bring great immediate delight to the soul. Lectio Divina is not, as a rule, immediately gratifying. It is an active and passive process of long duration. One does not reap the day following the sowing! The worm is not instantly transformed into a butterfly.<sup>5</sup> It has to be practiced constantly if we want to bring our lives into conformity with Lord Jesus Christ.

#### A. *Lectio*

The Lectio should begin in a spirit of faith in God’s word in Scripture and in His ability to speak through Sacred Scripture. This faith could be expressed in some explicit act or verbal formula. Consequent upon this faith we must maintain an attitude of great reverence for the Word of God. Then we should call upon the Holy Spirit to enlighten our mind and enkindle our hearts that we might understand the Divine words and conform our lives to them.<sup>6</sup>

In Lectio Divina our Lord is teaching us to listen to Him and to seek Him in silence. He gently invites us into His presence. God sends His Word to us as He sent it to Abraham: to reveal Himself, to transform us, to create for Himself a people. His Word is not an empty or powerless word: it is a life-giving Word, a transforming Word.<sup>7</sup>

Some Christians use, in their daily Lectio Divina, one of the readings from the Eucharistic liturgy for the day; others prefer to work through a particular book of the Bible. It makes no difference which text is chosen, as long as one has no set goal of “covering” a certain amount of text: the amount of text “covered” is in God’s hands, not ours. Then we turn to the text and read it slowly. Savor each portion of the reading, constantly listening for the “quiet voice.” We should not expect ecstasies or enlightening.

Both the initial reading of the whole text and the subsequent repetitive reading require patience. On one hand the reader should not be concerned about understanding, but on the other hand he should not try to shut down his mind. When the reader has been drawn to a particular phrase and starts to reflect on its meaning, then he has begun to the next step, *Meditatio*.

#### B. *Meditatio*

When we have found a word or passage in the Scripture that speak to us in a personal way, we must take it in and reflect on it. “Now, in the *Meditatio*...I want to know more about Him, to welcome Him into my life and open up to Him, in greater trust and confidence – I want to learn who He really is for me and what He wants to reveal to me” –

Thelma Hall said.<sup>8</sup> As many writers put it – we must “chew” and “ruminate” the Word of God and apply what we have read to our lives.

The goal of meditations is to let our mind be shaped by the mind of Jesus Christ revealed in Scripture. Through meditation we allow God’s Word to become His word for us, a Word that touches us and affects us at our deepest levels.

It may be that difficulties arise in the meditation: a person may find his or her mind dry, understanding empty, etc. It is most important that we do not give way to discouragement on such occasions, but persevere in the practice of *Lectio*. “Don’t give in to worry, the Lord in this way releases us from egocentrism and teaches us to accept help from others and dependence on others.”<sup>9</sup> We always should ask the Holy Spirit for help.

Meditation has an important role to play in forming us as Christians. It helps us to grow in our knowledge of God’s constant work of love in all creation, and in our own individual lives; it increases and enriches our familiarity with the life and teaching of Jesus and our love for Him, and leads us to reflect how we should respond to His call in love and service.<sup>10</sup>

### C. *Oratio*

The third step in *Lectio Divina* is *Oratio* – “prayer of the heart.” St. Thomas Aquinas wrote: “... when we pray to God, the very prayer we send forth makes us intimate with Him, inasmuch as our soul is raised up to God, converses with Him in spiritual affection, and adores Him in spirit and truth.”<sup>11</sup>

Prayer is an activity of our practical intellect. Because we are not sufficient in and of ourselves to attain this end, but require assistance of our Lord and His saints, we make known to Him our needs and desires, in an ordered and fitting manner through prayer.

A deeper understanding of the reality will show us that we make known our needs and desires to God not to make known to Him that which He knows before we ask, but in order that our desires might be shaped according to His Will; that through the exercise of our desire in prayer we might be prepared to receive His gifts, and finally that we might receive His gifts through the order He has disposed in His wise providence, whereby He has foreordained that certain of His gifts would be given as answers to prayers.<sup>12</sup>

Prayer is our way of responding to the God Who has spoken to us. The Word, which we have pondered, will suggest to us from time to time an appeal for forgiveness, or an expression of thanks for all graces received. Prayer becomes our expression of praise, of love, and outpouring of our hearts.

Practicing the *Lectio Divina*, we stand before our Lord whose voice we heard in the Scripture. Accepted Word starts to be alive in our intellect and our hearts. That Word awaits an answer from us. That Word delivers us to full union with God, to *Contemplatio*.

### D. *Contemplatio*

Contemplation is the final fruit of the *Lectio*. We simply rest in the presence of our Lord. We learn a new language (silence), a new way of being. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we will feel the desire to see the Lord, who has spoken to us. Contemplation is a gift from God. In the past, contemplation was not regarded as a goal to be achieved through some method of prayer, but was simply accepted with gratitude as God’s recurring gift. If we want to grow in

this kind of prayer and to deepen our relationship with God, it is important to dedicate some amount of time every day for interior stillness and silence in prayer.

The experience of contemplation should of itself be a delightful experience, a delight in comparison with which all the pleasures of this world will indeed seem vain and empty. Nevertheless, because of our weakness and distance from God, it will often be the case that contemplation involves a painful purgation – the light of God hurts the eyes of our soul until it has strengthened us to the point where we can bear to look upon it.<sup>13</sup>

### III. Lectio Divina practiced by St. Dominic

Our Father Dominic left for us, his followers, a good example of how to practice the Lectio Divina. He started this kind of prayer in his early years. St. Dominic practiced Lectio Divina when he was a very young man, during his time in Palencia. “Indefatigable when it was a matter of study, he must have passed many a night in meditating in this way, almost without sleep.”<sup>14</sup>

The author of “The Nine Ways of Prayer of St. Dominic” documented for us, Dominic’s spiritual sons and daughters, how he practiced Lectio Divina. In the “Eighth Way of Prayer” we read: “...After the canonical Hours and the grace which he said in common after meals, the father [Dominic] would go off quickly on his own to a cell or somewhere, sober and alert and anointed with a spirit of devotion which had been sung in choir or during the meal; there he would sit down to read or pray, recollecting himself in himself and fixing himself in the presence of God. Sitting there quietly he would open some book before him, arming himself first with the sign of the cross, and then he would read. And he would be moved in his mind as delightfully as if he heard the Lord speaking to him.. If anyone was inquisitive enough to want to spy on him secretly, he would find that the holy father Dominic was like Moses, who went into the innermost desert and saw the burning bush and the Lord speaking and calling to him to humble himself. The man of God had a prophetic way of passing quickly from reading to prayer and from meditation to contemplation.”<sup>15</sup>

#### Exercises for Discussion and Practice:

1. What obstacles do I encounter when finding time to contemplate the Word of God?
2. Am I willing to take 30 consecutive minutes in one week’s time to contemplate God’s Word?
3. Start a journal of your experience in practicing Lectio Divina. Write down the Bible passage being read, any thoughts, experiences, or obstacles, etc., you encounter, and the date and time of your next practice. Make sure to keep that appointment with God’s Word.

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<sup>1</sup> JP II, Novo Millennio Ineunte, p. 23, <http://www.catholiclinks.org>

<sup>2</sup> Thelma Hall, R.C., Too Deep for Words. Rediscovering Lectio Divina, Paulist Press, New York / Mahwah, 1988, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Lectio Divina as a school of prayer among the Fathers of the Desert, Centre Saint Louis-des-Francais, Rome, 1995, p. 2, <http://users.skynet.be/scourmont/Armand/wri/lectio-eng.html>

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- <sup>4</sup> William of St. Thierry, *Lectio Divina*, p. 1, <http://www.osb.org/lectio/thierry.htm>
- <sup>5</sup> Bernardo Olivera, OSB, *Lectio Divina*, p. 5, <http://www.osb.org/lectio/olivera.html>
- <sup>6</sup> Society of St. John, *The Practice of Lectio Divina*, p. 2, <http://www.ssjohn.com/liturgy/lectio.html>
- <sup>7</sup> George Martin, *Reading Scripture as the Word of God, Practical Approaches and Attitudes*, Servant Publications, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1998, p.12.
- <sup>8</sup> Thelma Hall, R.C., *Too Deep for...*, p. 38.
- <sup>9</sup> Michal Ziolo OCSO, "O Lectio Divina", *WDrodze*, Nr. 9 (361) 2003, p. 101.
- <sup>10</sup> Thelma Hall, R.C., *Too Deep for...*, p.41.
- <sup>11</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Light of Faith, The Compendium of Theology*, Sophia Institute, Manchester, NH, 1993, p. 335.
- <sup>12</sup> Society of St. John, *The Practice of Lectio ...*, p. 5.
- <sup>13</sup> Society of St. John, *The Practice of Lectio ...*, p.7.
- <sup>14</sup> M.-H. Vicaire, O.P., *Saint Dominic and his times*, ALT Publishing Company, Wisconsin, 1964, p. 28.
- <sup>15</sup> *Early Dominicans, Selected Writings*, Paulist Press, New York, Ramsey, Toronto, 1982, p. 101.