

Lectio Divina in Historical Context
By Matt Krick

The practice of *lectio divina* has served as a way of encountering God's presence for generations. *Lectio divina* is "a close, prayerful, openness to the text so that one both reads the text and, in patient expectation, is open to the text speaking back to the person."¹

The earliest roots of *lectio divina* can be inferred from the Hebrew Scriptures² and we see the penetrating nature of Scripture in the New Testament.³ *Lectio divina* became substantial to the early church as well. "Since many people were illiterate and many that could read didn't have Bibles, *lectio divina* offered a way of attending to Scripture...with an ear to hearing a word from God."⁴

In the 3rd Century, Origen stressed the need to devote oneself to the "divine reading" of the text.⁵ "Fourth and fifth century patristic writers, such as St. Jerome, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, and St. Hilary, used the terms *lectio divina*...and St. Benedict required monks to devote perhaps more time to reading Scripture than to any other single

¹ Lawrence S. Cunningham and Keith J. Egan, *Christian Spirituality: Themes from the Tradition* (New York: Paulist Pr, 1996), 38.

² See especially Josh. 1:8; Ps. 1:1-2, 19:14, 77:6, 119, Ez. 3:1-3.

³ Hebrews 4:12-13

⁴ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2005), 168.

⁵ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading to Live* (Trappist, KY: Liturgical Pr, 2009), 29.

waking activity.”⁶ The devotional reading of Scripture was clearly central to the early church and the monastic tradition.

Over time *lectio divina* took on a more formal approach. The 12th Century Carthusian monk, Guigo II developed the four stages we associate with *lectio divina* today. “Guigo argued that one first reads, which leads one to think about (i.e. meditate on) the significance of the text; that process in turn leads a person to respond in prayer, and that prayer, in turn, should point to the gift of the quiet stillness in the presence of God (contemplation).”⁷ Some have added an initial step called *Silencio* (Silence)⁸ to place oneself in a posture of being present to God and prepare oneself to hear the divine word. Mulholland who also includes *Silencio*, adds a sixth step he calls *Incarnatio* (Incarnation), or “Living out the text.”⁹ This allows the text to carry with one throughout the day as one desires to put it into practice.

Guigo II wrote a letter known as *The Ladder of the Monks* in which he outlined the four steps of *lectio divina*.¹⁰ Due to Guigo’s method, *lectio divina* has often been viewed as a way of ascending. David Benner, while respecting Guigo’s development of

⁶Dan Merkur, *Crucified with Christ: Meditation On the Passion, Mystical Death, and the Medieval Invention of Psychotherapy* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2008), 34

⁷ Cunningham and Egan, *Christian Spirituality*, 38.

⁸ See Calhoun, 168.

⁹ M. Robert Mulholland Jr, *Invitation to a Journey: a Road Map for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 1996), 113, 115.

¹⁰ Cunningham and Egan, *Christian Spirituality*, 93.

lectio, takes issue with Guigo's linear approach.¹¹ Benner argues, "Christian spirituality is a spirituality of descent...[therefore] all four movements of prayer are equally important."¹²

Lectio Divina continues to be a rich spiritual practice in the life of the church today. It provides us space to stop and listen to God's word for us and to rest in God. It also leads us to a place of becoming more aware of God's presence everywhere and then to begin to practice *lectio* on life. Benner says, "*lectio divina* involves receiving God's revelation wherever it occurs."¹³ *Lectio Divina* is a movement toward ever increasing oneness with God and ultimately, "Our primary purpose in reading is to acquire the mind of Christ."¹⁴

¹¹ David G. Benner, *Opening to God: Lectio Divina and Life as Prayer* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Books, 2010), 52, 55.

¹² Ibid., 55.

¹³ Ibid., 54.

¹⁴ Jean Leclercq, "Lectio divina," *Worship* 58, no.3 (May 1, 1984): 239.

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