Lectio Divina: Reading and Praying the Word of God

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Until the renewal in religious life after Vatican Council II, *lectio divina* was obscurely known and practiced in some monastic communities. Yet as much as contemplative prayer is associated with Carmelite spirituality, the Spiritual Exercises with Jesuit spirituality, and mental prayer with Sulpician spirituality, *lectio divina* is associated with those who follow The Rule of St. Benedict. In the years leading up to Vatican Council II and following it, as religious were returning to the roots of their charisms and spirituality, articles began to appear on the topic of *lectio divina*. Now in the last decade, entire books on the topic have surfaced. And, happily, this practice of monks has begun to find a place in the spirituality of many people desirous of reading the Scriptures in a reflective and prayerful manner.

As this issue of *Liturgical Ministry* focuses on preparing for the Sunday liturgy, we suggest that taking time to reflect on the Scripture passages assigned for the Sunday celebration can greatly enhance one's participation. While the earliest writers on *lectio divina* emphasize that its practice has no apostolic utility, like homily preparation, we have come to see today how its use by people from a variety of backgrounds has had an enriching effect on their spiritual life. The early monks held the reading of the Scriptures to be so essential a part of their daily life that they understood it as the pathway to *conversatio morum*, the ongoing formation for which they had come to the monastic life. Reflection on the word of God was understood, if done intensely and prayerfully, to possess the power of calling people to continual conversion of life. They believed that there was a dynamism in the word of God that could renew and re-create people, with God's word forming them by its own unique and mysterious power. And yet, is that not what we, whether a monk or any Christian, hope to find in our reading of the Scriptures and in our participation in the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist? If so, the practice of *lectio divina* has something wonderful to offer anyone who practices it.

There are many who speak about the method of *lectio divina*. Indeed,
there is a method, but what is more essential than knowing a method is creating an attitude toward the practice of *lectio divina*. The question that must be posed is, “Why am I doing *lectio divina*?” Though it should ultimately be for more than enhancing our celebration of the Sunday Eucharist, the practice of *lectio* can indeed do that. Encountering the word of God in a prayerful way draws us into communion with the One who speaks the word to us. If we are looking for deeper union with God, if we are truly willing to listen to the divine voice and are ready to respond to it, then we are on the right road with the practice of *lectio divina*. As with all those men and women in the Scriptures who experienced an encounter with God, there is a call to a more radical obedience; such obedience is formative, giving new direction to our lives. Daily reading the word of God draws us into the same paschal mystery first experienced by the people of Israel and then lived most fully by Jesus. Jesus was formed by the word of God heard in the domestic setting of his home and in the communal setting of the synagogue. It drew him into communion with the God whom he called *Abba* and eventually led him through the mystery of the cross to the glory of the resurrection. That is how *lectio divina* complements the celebration of the Eucharist: the word opens us to the voice of God beckoning each of us in a unique and wondrous way along the path to glory.

*I. The Word of God:
A Sacrament of Divine Presence*

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, has given us a vibrant spirituality of the word, teaching us to understand the Liturgy of the Word as a focal point of the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist. *DV* speaks about the sacred liturgy nourishing the faithful “from the table of both the word of God and of the body of Christ.” Some of the earliest sources emphasize the place of distinction and devotion for the faithful the divine word holds. Nourishment comes from both tables, bringing divine life in a dynamic and graced way. In his Homilies on the Book of Exodus, Origen challenges us:

> See whether or not you “conceive,” that is, retain the words of God lest they slip from your hand and you lose them.

> I want to urge you to this by examples drawn from your religious practices. If you are habitually present at the divine mysteries, you know how carefully and respectfully you protect the Lord’s body when it is given to you, lest a fragment of it fall and a bit of the consecrated treasure be lost. You would think yourself guilty, and with good reason, if some of it were lost through your negligence. Now if you rightly take such precaution when it is a question of the Lord’s body, how can you think that neglect of God’s word will be less severely punished than neglect of his body?*

Origen brings the “two tables” of the word and the Eucharist into a formative unity, both as essential sources of nourishment for the believer. Coupled with the fundamental idea of nourishment is a sense of devotion, honor, reverence, and respect that is due the word of God, in which Christ is present.

Origen had a strong influence on St. Jerome, both theologically and rhetorically. We find a corresponding the-
logical development in Jerome’s Tractate on Psalms 145 and 147. Commenting on Psalm 145:7, “It is he who gives bread to the hungry,” Jerome wrote the following:

“He gives food to the hungry.” Someone supposes that he says “heavenly bread” in reference to the sacred mysteries. And we accept that indeed, because truly it is the flesh of Christ, truly it is the blood of Christ. Besides this let us say in other words, the bread of Christ and his flesh is the divine word and the heavenly teaching.7

Then, commenting on Psalm 147:14, “he feeds you with finest wheat,” Jerome speaks in a similar vein in this context:

When the Lord says, “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood,” and although this can be understood in reference to the sacrament, nevertheless the word of the Scriptures is truly the body of Christ, and his blood, it is the divine teaching. If when we go to the sacred mysteries, the one who is faithful understands, if only a small particle [of the word] has fallen [into our hearing], we are in jeopardy. If when we hear the word of God, and the word of God, and the flesh of Christ and his blood, is poured into our hearing, and we are thinking about something else, into how great a danger are we running? “He feeds you with finest wheat.” The divine word is most delicious, having in itself every delight. Whatever you have desired is born from the divine word.6

In this passage, Jerome draws a line connecting the motif of the manna in the desert with the passage in Wisdom 16:20–21, 26, which describes the manna as God’s “word which preserves those who believe” in it.

Similarly, Caesarius of Arles addressed the same topic in one of his sermons, in a manner similar to that of Origen and Jerome. He says:

I have an important question for you, brothers and sisters. Which do you think more important—the word of God or the body of Christ? If you want to answer correctly, you must tell me that the word of God is no less important than the body of Christ! How careful we are, when the body of Christ is distributed to us, not to let any bit of it fall to the ground from our hand! But we should be just as careful not to let slip from our hearts the word of God that is addressed to us, by thinking or speaking of something else when we should be listening to it with devotion. He will be no less guilty, who listen negligently to the word of God than he who by his negligence allows the Lord’s body to fall to the ground.7

These early sources emphasize an attitude and belief toward the word of God. It possesses a divine presence just as truly as the consecrated bread and wine. It calls for our attention and devotion. I am reminded of what one of my seminary professors said to us while we were studying theology in preparation for ordination. “You will find yourselves in situations where, with only ten minutes’ notice, you will have to celebrate the Eucharist before a crowd of a thousand people. Your thoughts will probably be, ‘what can I say on such short notice, or what should I say?’ I dare to tell you, your ten minutes before Mass will be better spent on preparing to proclaim the gospel well, rather than what you will say. Remember, the gospel is God’s word; the homily is only your word. And which is more innately powerful?” Do we believe that the word of God possesses a power to touch lives, transform hearts, draw people to conversion? Prayerful and reflective reading of the word of God prepares us to hear the voice of God speaking to the Church and speaking to us individually. When that happens our transformation into the living word of God begins to take place; the spoken word becomes a living word in us, in our actions, in our deeds, in our thoughts, and in our speech.

There is a wonderful story among the Tales of the Rabbis that illustrates the transformative power of the word of God.

There once was a young boy named Mordechai. His parents loved him dearly. He was the perfect child, except for one thing. He refused to study the Word of God. It did not matter to him that all the boys his age were studying Torah. He would not do it. His parents promised to give him anything he wanted. They threatened him with everything he didn’t want. If only he would study Torah. But come what may, young Mordechai would not study the Word of God.

His parents were at their wits’ end. They did not know what else to do. Then, one day, they heard that the Great Rabbi was coming to visit their village. They were delighted. “Surely he will be able to get Mordechai to read Torah,” they said to one another.

When the Great Rabbi arrived, the parents took young Mordechai to him. “Our son is a fine boy,” they explained, “except for one thing. He refuses to study the Word of God.”

“You give this boy to me,” the Rabbi shouted, “and I will teach him a lesson he will never forget!” The parents were frightened by the Rabbi’s rage. “Should we give Mordechai to this angry bear of a man?” they asked themselves. “Yet what else can we do?” So they handed young Mordechai over to the Rabbi.

The Rabbi grabbed Mordechai, led him into the next room, and slammed the door behind them. Young Mordechai stood in the corner of the room trembling. The Rabbi just stood there looking at him. “Mordechai,” he whispered, “come here.” The young boy inched his
way over to the Great Rabbi who stood with arms wide open.

Without saying a word, the Rabbi folded his arms around the young boy and held him silently, against his heart.

After a while, the Rabbi took young Mordechai by the hand and led him to the door. Then all of a sudden, he flung open the door and threw the young boy into the room where his parents were waiting. "I have taught the boy a lesson he will never forget!" the Rabbi shouted. "You mark my words. From this day forward he will come to know Torah."

And so it was. Young Mordechai studied the Word of God as no one in the village had ever studied it before. He learned it all by heart. His parents were so proud of him.

As the years went by, Mordechai himself became a great Rabbi. People would come to him with their problems. They would marvel at the breadth of his wisdom and the depth of his compassion. In their amazement, they would often ask, "Rabbi, who taught you to read the Torah?" Mordechai would smile and say, "I first learned to read Torah when the Great Rabbi held me and taught me to listen from my heart... to listen... from my heart."

There are several points to be gleaned from this charming story. The first has to do with study of the word of God. The parents wanted Mordechai to study Torah, but he wouldn't. While it is fair to say that lectio divina, the practice of sacred reading, is open to everyone, some knowledge of the Scriptures is important for its practice. While a person does not need to be a technical reader of the sacred texts in their original languages, an informed understanding of the background of the various books of the Bible enhances the reader's understanding of its theological and spiritual message. Today there are a variety of wonderful sources available to help the interested reader to become an informed reader. A knowledge of some of the historical background of a passage, the section of Scripture in which it is classified (Pentateuch, historical, prophetic, or wisdom writings, gospel, letter or epistle), the genre or kind of literary form—all of these can enhance our understanding of a passage and enable us to probe its meaning for today. Some knowledge of the background of a passage is important for doing lectio divina.

The practice of lectio divina is best done in an environment of silence, where distractions are few. That is quite difficult in our contemporary society where TVs and radios blare all day long, where conversations continue incessantly in the workplace, where teachers find it difficult to keep students from constant chatter, and where even in sacred places signs must be posted to encourage silence. We, as a society, have become uncomfortable with silence and yet people flock to monasteries for days of recollection, weekend retreats, and time to break the incessant noises that invade their lives. The writings of the major religious traditions of the world (Christianity, Islam, Buddhism) all emphasize the necessity of silence for coming into communion with God, with the sacred, with oneself. The earliest milieu of lectio divina was the desert, a place of solitude and silence. The monastic tradition has the monk doing sacred reading in one's cell. Carving out time when silence can be treasured and welcomed creates the space where lectio divina happens most effectively. Silence creates the place where we can listen, listen attentively to the voice of God speaking to us through the divine word.

The first word of The Rule of St. Benedict is a command: listen. The ability to listen with faith and prayer lies at the heart of the monastic vocation; that is probably why the practice of lectio divina grew out of the monastic life. St. Benedict specifies and devotes times during the day for his monks to engage themselves in the practice of holy reading. During certain times of the year, more than the usual amount of time is given to this practice of listening to the word of God. The intensity St. Benedict expects in reading and listening to the divine word has the formative effect of awakening in the heart the divine presence and the divine voice, which can speak to a person at any moment and in any situation. Though the roots of such spirituality are monastic, it lends itself well to all Christians who seek to hear the voice of God, to listen attentively for the call to continual conversion.
and to follow the word in faith. The Benedictine Order has long had an association of lay men and women who are joined to a monastery by a spiritual bond and who adapt aspects of monastic spirituality into their daily lives. They are called Benedictine Oblates. One of the areas of spirituality to which many are drawn is the practice of *lectio divina.* Once they have been taught the method at the monastery of their affiliation, many Benedictine Oblates come to treasure the practice of reading biblical texts daily as part of their spiritual exercises.

In our society today many voices compete for our attention. The question is, how well can we listen to any one voice with so many coming at us? Today many people work with "white noise" in the background, whether that be the radio, a CD player, or co-workers chatting. Coming into a space of silence can be frightening for some people, because it is such a new and different experience. A person does not come into the divine presence for reading, listening, and praying with the word of God in five-and-ten-minute snippets of time. We must prepare ourselves to listen; that includes calming down within ourselves, pushing aside the many voices that come at us, and focusing on what we are about to do. When we listen carefully in silence, we do hear the voice of God. We also hear our own voice; and we hear some things that are not very flattering in terms of our Christian witness and thought. And yet such listening is a way to greater truth in our relationship with God, with one another, and with ourselves.  

Another wonderful story from the Rabbinic tradition portrays the importance and significance of listening well as the way to communion with God:

A little boy once approached his Rabbi and asked, "Rabbi, why does God no longer speak to His People? He spoke so beautifully to Abraham. He spoke with such power to Moses. He spoke so clearly to Jeremiah and the prophets. Rabbi, why does God no longer speak to His People?"

The Rabbi shook his head as though he were in pain. "My son," he replied, "it is not that God no longer speaks to His people. It is that no one these days can stoop down low enough to listen. No one ... can stoop down low enough ... to listen."

Sometimes in life we have to stoop low to listen to what God is saying to us. It can often be in those passages of Scripture that seem either all too technical, too difficult to grasp, or too obvious for our careful reflection. There, and often there, God speaks to us a new word of wisdom that can give our life meaning and direction. That is what *lectio divina* encourages us to do: to pore over the same words time and time again, until something breaks through to our hearts, revealing to us the voice of God. At times it can be a word of challenge; at other times, it can be a message of deep consolation. Yet what remains the important point for us to remember is that we must listen, listen with our heart and mind. We must never think we are stooping too low to hear the voice of God; that divine word can come to us anywhere, in any situation, and on any page of the Scriptures, if we wait and pray for its transforming message. It is not uncommon for a person to have spent time reflecting on a passage, and then during the day to have that word return to the mind and heart; the word of God resonates with the experiences of our lives, giving us guidance, pointing us in the direction of God's will. That is the attitude to maintain when coming to do sacred reading.

### II. The Method: Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio, and Contemplatio

As noted earlier, the writings of Origen, Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine, and Gregory all give witness to a kind of reading of Scripture that we call *lectio divina.* In its earliest forms this kind of reading is made up of *lectio* (reading) and *oratio* (prayer). The reading of passages in the Bible would always conclude with prayer, prayer of the heart. One would pray from the text that was read, making application from the biblical word to one's present life situation or the life of the community in which one lived. That is a powerful way of seeing prayer grow in a person, for the word of God itself forms the person's prayer; the divine word teaches us what we should pray for, what we should bring before God as our real needs. Sometimes the Scriptures will surprise us, for we go to a passage thinking what it will tell us, and, when we finish reading and reflecting on it, we come away with another idea, equally important and formative for our prayer. St. Augustine's comment about the word of God as being "ever ancient and ever new" is apt here. The divine word was once spoken to a community in a particular place and time addressing its needs, hopes, and desires. Today that same word speaks to another community of faith in a vibrant and living way addressing its present situation of needs, desires, and hopes. We have to read with faith and understanding to allow that to unfold before us.

It was in the twelfth century that Guigo II, a Carthusian monk and prior of the Grand Chartreuse in France, put into written form the fourfold method of *lectio divina* that had been in practice for centuries and which we continue to practice today. Guigo describes the method's progress in the following manner: *lectio* (read-
ing of the text), *meditatio* (reflecting and meditating on the text), *oratio* (praying from the text), and *contemplatio* (deep contemplation on the text). In his treatise Guigo describes the method as a ladder fastened to the ground and ascending to the heavens. He believed that reading the Scriptures in this way led to mystical contemplation. Guigo used the following image to explain the process: “Reading, as it were, puts food whole into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation is the sweetness itself which gladdens and refreshes.”

The image draws a close connection to spiritual nourishment for the reader; God’s word is the source that gives us energy, vitality, and health as people of faith, God’s people. Before we move into a description of the method, it is important to say that this is not something that should be practiced rigidly. God’s Spirit works in ways that cannot be confined by methods; and we believe that God’s word is Spirit-filled. Each step of the method opens us to a different part of the experience of *lectio divina*. For centuries this method has worked well for many, many people.

We now proceed to a description of each of the various progressive steps in the practice of *lectio divina*.

A. *Lectio* (Reading)
The first thing to keep in mind regarding the kind of reading we are talking about here is that it is quite different from the manner in which one reads a newspaper, magazine, or novel. Also, it is not study, an attempt to glean information. Rather, this kind of reading is rather slow and repetitive, focused on absorbing the word itself in a reflective manner. St. Ambrose writes in his prologue to the *Orationes sive meditationes*, “we should read them [the words] not in agitation, but in calm; not hurriedly, but slowly, a few words at a time, pausing in attentive reflection ... Then the reader will experience their ability to enkindle the ardor of prayer.” It is clear from what Ambrose writes that this kind of reading is directed toward communion with God in dialogue. And it should be noted here that God begins this dialogue. Our first task is to listen well so that we might respond to whatever it is God is saying. In the Prologue to *The Rule of St. Benedict*, in speaking about the manner in which one should listen to the precepts of the Lord, St. Benedict talks about listening “with the ear of the heart.” That is the kind of reverence with which we should read. Sometimes we receive an important letter from someone special; we read and reread the letter with care and intensity so that we might take its message “to heart.” This is the kind of reading we are talking of here. In school we are taught how to skim-read a text for the general idea of what is says; *lectio* is not skim reading, but rather a deliberate and prolonged digesting of the text, searching for meaning that touches one’s life and transforms the human heart.

To accomplish this kind of reading it is often necessary to take time before reading to calm the mind and heart, to place oneself in the presence of God, and to remind oneself that this task is about something sacred: awaiting a word of life from God. Establishing an environment of peace and calm is important to the task at hand. God’s voice is often heard in the quiet of one’s heart; that is why the reading needs to be attentive and focused. Whether one is preparing the Sunday readings alone or with others, it is a good idea to read the texts aloud, even if softly. Hearing the word spoken aloud, as we do in the liturgy itself, awakens ideas in the mind and draws our attention to points of significance for us. For example, when doing *lectio* with a group, it is worthwhile to read through a short passage slowly several times; then allow time for silence. Quietly and reverently the people in the group may simply say *one word* or *one phrase* (yes! that’s all) that struck them or serves as a springboard to reflecting...
on the spiritual meaning of the text. An atmosphere of quiet, calm, and peace is important for sacred reading.

In preparing for the forthcoming Sunday liturgy one might begin on Monday with a half hour of lectio and continue on each day through the week in thirty-minute (or more) periods of time. Since the first reading and the gospel are often connected in terms of their message, it might be worthwhile to do lectio with the first reading, then the responsorial psalm, then the gospel, and finish with the second reading. That’s one approach. For someone else, it might be best to begin with the gospel and then move to the first reading and responsorial psalm. Don’t neglect to read the responsorial psalm reflectively. It is a Spirit-filled word responding to a Spirit-filled word; the short lines and phrases provide wonderful ways to enter into the rich experience of the text. As a text that is a prayer, the responsorial psalm draws us into the heartthrob of the Scriptures, the divine-human response. The ancient practice of lectio divina we move from reading the word to meditating upon it. The purpose of meditation is to assimilate the word of God, to allow it to become more and more a part of our hearts. I remember reading some years ago a definition of meditation by the Jewish theologian and philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel, which serves our purpose well. He wrote, “To meditate is to know how to stand still and to dwell upon a word.” In reading the word of God there can be one word or a phrase that somehow plucks the strings of our heart and evokes a resonance within us. That word or phrase may cause us to remember other biblical passages where that same word possessed a special message for us. Thus the process of meditation begins and progresses forward.

In the inaugural vision of the prophet Ezekiel, when he received his call to serve as God’s prophet to the people in exile, God spoke these words to him: “Son of man ... take into your heart all my words that I speak to you; hear them well” (Ezek 3:10–11). There are two elements of this divine word to the prophet that speak to the task of meditation: “take into your heart all my words,” and “hear them well.” God’s words should not pass quickly through one’s mind; rather, they are intended to linger and find a resting place in the heart and the mind. To hear them well and to assimilate them, they should be repeated over and over again as if to memorize them, to take them to heart. St. Augustine provides another image where, in speaking about the reading of sacred texts, he says that one should look to a cow for an example of how to approach this task. As the cow chews her cud over and over again, so should we read the word of God, saying the words over and over again to digest them and to allow them to become part of us. This image of St. Augustine was taken up by numerous other commentators into the period of the Middle Ages as the practice of lectio divina became more and more widespread.16

As Guigo explained this process of meditating, he used the image of the person becoming a “living library of the sacred word.”17 One thought drawn from the Scriptures leads to another, and another, and another, complementing one another, bringing richness to the reflection on God’s word. Along these same lines, the Scriptures speak of Mary as having the openness to the word of God as it unfolded in her life. At the visit of the shepherds in Bethlehem, “Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart” (Luke 2:19). And after finding Jesus in the temple with the elders, the text tells us that, “his mother kept all the things in her heart” (Luke 2:51b). When something speaks to the heart, it raises probing questions, moves us to wonder deeply, to think intensely, and to pray passionately. That leads us to our next step in this process.

C. Oratio (Prayer)
As mentioned earlier, holy reading leads to prayer; prayer is a goal of lectio divina. We have talked about how sacred reading is intended to open us to the voice of God speaking to the Church, speaking to each of us. Prayer is best understood as a dialogue or conversation between God and a person. All too often our prayer begins with our concerns being voiced to God, words of need and hope. The ancient practice of lectio takes for granted that we begin by first listening to God speak to us; then after we have heard God speak, we respond. Sometimes we respond with a word thanking and blessing God for the divine goodness showered upon us. Other times we respond with an acknowledgment of our weakness and sinfulness. And yet other times God’s word reveals to us our previously unknown needs, needs of which we have now become all too aware. Thus we can see how the word of God itself teaches us to pray, shows us what our greatest needs are, and opens us to the mysterious transforming power that reveals to us our deepest longings and desires. Reflecting and praying with these texts in the course of the week can then bring a powerful sense of prayer to the Sunday Liturgy. There is also a graced dynamism in the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist. Even after reflecting and praying with sacred texts all
week long, we hear something new, vital, and inspiring in
that same word that has been the source of our reflection.

There is an important distinction to make here. It has
been emphasized that the prayer that flows from our sacred
reading must be personal. At the same time, it is not self-
centered but God-centered; it is what God has revealed in
the sacred word and which has then resonated in one’s
heart. What has it said to me about growing deeper into the
life of Christ? What has it said about a more authentic love
of my neighbor? Of what has it accused me and called me
to personal conversion? What has it demonstrated as rea­
sons for praising, thanking, and blessing the God who so
graciously touches my daily life? While oratio is personal, it
is not self-absorbed; it is personal, flowing from the word of
God, through us, and then back again to God.

When we are truly doing lectio divina, oratio flows with
a kind of natural quality that shows the authenticity of
sacred reading. Being immersed in the divine word
draws us to response. As the word has spoken to us, there
arises the natural need to acknowledge the power of the
word that has revealed itself. That acknowledgment is
prayer, a response. God’s word is mysteriously assimilated
into our life; God’s word becomes our word. This was one
of the characteristic experiences of the prophets of the
Old Testament. Their lives were so drawn into the move­
ment of God in their present situation that they became
the mouthpiece of God, proclaiming the divine word as
their own. As they would speak, they would say, “Thus
says the Lord.” True ambassadors for God, they gave God’s
word as their own. Such a level of intimacy with God’s
word comes to us through the prayer that is our response
to a voice that speaks clearly to our life, our situation, our
needs, our hopes, and our greatest longings.

Through the regular practice of oratio our hearts are
made ready to hear what God is saying. The early
Christian writers spoke about the capax Dei, our capaci­
ty for God, our ability to receive whatever it is that God
wishes to speak to us. Hearing God’s word and respond­ing
to it in faith day after day has a transforming effect on
our lives; our capacity to respond is enlarged. The chal­
lenges of the gospel message begin to break through our
fears; our fears become the pathways to deeper expres­sion
of faith. Where before we could not even understand
the message of God’s word, it begins to call forth from us
a reply that we were not capable of making before.
Bringing all this with us to the Sunday celebration joins
us to the paschal mystery of Jesus in new and profound
ways.

D. Contemplatio (Contemplation)
As we have talked about the method of lectio divina, we
would think of contemplation as being the end, the con-
clusion, or the completion of the process. In truth, it is a
new beginning. The experience of contemplation is where
we find that words are no longer needed to express the
sense of divine presence that comes to us. Contemplation
enables us to enter more deeply into communion with
God, which is the goal of human life. In the presence of
God we come to know the deepest truths of our existence:
the infinite love God has for us, the radical call of the
gospel, the wisdom God has planted in creation, the
power of sin in human life, the ongoing salvation of God
in our lives. Realizing, at least in part, some of these ele­
ments, we are drawn to awe, thanksgiving, praise, and
repentance. True contemplation will often reveal both the
light and the darkness of our human existence, drawing
us to the fuller recognition of our life’s goal and our
movement toward it. The word of God plays strongly into
the experience of contemplation. It reveals to us, often
unexpectedly, some of the strongest truths that belong to
people of faith. For example, the very simple command of
Deuteronomy 30:19c, “Choose life that you and your
descendants may truly live,” gives an essential insight into
the human situation where choices come to us each day;
a person striving for a life of holiness will see deeply into
that text and make decisions that lead to abiding commu­
nion with God.

One text from Scripture that is used to describe the

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Authentic state of contemplation is found in Psalm 37: "Be still before the Lord and wait in patience" (Ps 37:7). Reflection on God's word will lead us ultimately to that posture of peace before God. Contemplation is a movement from darkness to light, from slavery to freedom, from doubt to belief, from uncertainty to hope. In the midst of all this, contemplation leads to the most basic of all God's laws, the two great commandments: love of God and love of neighbor. As simple as that sounds, its challenge and profundity lie before each of us, for our journey to God leads through our relationships with one another, striving to love others as God has loved us. God's word will reveal this to us time and time again, but we must have the silence, the space, the desire, and the openness to hear that word in all its power and dynamism.

III. Conclusions

Though the practice of lectio divina comes from a monastic tradition, it is nevertheless a vehicle for all people of faith who acknowledge the power of God's word to touch their lives. This ancient practice of reading and praying from the Scriptures can be a means of entering more fully into the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist. Reflecting on the word each day, in preparation for Sunday, ushers the person into the dynamic mystery of the biblical text.

By the daily reading of those chosen texts for Sunday, we prepare our heart to hear the word in the dynamic context of the Eucharistic Liturgy. Importantly, such an approach to the daily reading of the Scriptures grounds a person in a spirituality of the word, pointing toward the day of resurrection, preparing to celebrate the paschal mystery of Christ with the community of the faithful.

Such a spirituality highlights the true nourishment that comes from the table of the Word and the table of the Body of the Risen Christ. So often we think of nourishment only in relation to eating and drinking. There is also the spiritual nourishment that comes to us through the word of God teaching, inspiring, guiding, consoling, and challenging us. In the course of the week the round of daily tasks calls us to enter life's struggles with faith and courage, with the word of God as our source of strength. Then it is to the Sunday celebration that we bring not only our deepened understanding of God's word, but also the actions, words, and deeds that have been formed and transformed by the power of the divine word. There we offer our sacrifice of thanksgiving, united to the One who is the source of all blessing and hope, Jesus Christ.


3. DV, no. 21.

4. This text comes from Origen's Homilies on the Book of Exodus (Homily 13, par. 3). This translation of Origen's text is found in Lucus Bopp, "The Salvific Power of the Word According to the Church Fathers" in The Word: Readings in Theology, eds. The Canisianum, Innsbruck (New York: P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1964) 151.


6. Tractatus de Psalmus 147, Corpus Christianorum Latina, 337-38.


8. It is worth noting that not only are there early Christian sources that develop this idea, but also others like Thomas à Kempis who include a spirituality of the word in their writings. In his The Imitation of Christ, Thomas à Kempis devotes Section 11 of Book 4 to this very topic. It is entitled "That the Body of Christ and Holy Scripture are most necessary for the health of [a person]'s soul." He writes, "I perceive well that there are two things most necessary for me in this world, without which this miserable life would be insupportable. As long as I am in this body, I confess myself to have need of two things that is to say, food and light, and these two you have given me. You have given the Blessed Sacrament for the refreshment of my soul and body, and you have set your word as a lantern before my feet to show me the way I shall go. Without these two, I cannot live well." Cf. Thomas à Kempis, The Imitation of Christ, ed. with an Introduction by Harold C. Gardiner, S.J. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday Books, 1955) 224.

9. This story is told in its contemporary language in Francis Dorff, The Art of Passingover: An Invitation to Living Creatively (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1988) 22-23. Some of the text has been slightly altered.

10. Here are some sources which draw on Benedictine spirituality for the layperson, including some instruction on lectio divina: Elizabeth J. Canham, Heart Whispers: Benedictine Wisdom for Today (Nashville: Upper Room Books) 1999; Vest, Gathered in the Word.


13. Magrassi, Praying the Bible, 104.

14. There are passages in the Scriptures themselves where the word of God is referred to as nourishment (Deut 8:1-3; Wis 16:20-21, 26; Ezek 3:1-4; Amos 8:11-12; John 6:35-50).

15. Magrassi, Praying the Bible, 105-06.

16. Magrassi, Praying the Bible, 109-10. St. Bernard spoke of monks as "pure ruminators," having taken the word of God into themselves and allowed it to resonate off the walls of the human heart time and again.


18. Casey, Sacred Reading, 61.