



# *Lectia Divina*

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Summit on Lay Ministry –  
June 8, 2017

# Overview

- What is *lectio divina*?
- The History of *lectio divina*
- The Method of *lectio divina*
- Practical suggestions



# *What is Lectio Divina?*

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Introduction to the  
idea of Lectio Divina

# One of three pillars of monastic life

The day in a monastic community is divided between three activities: the *Opus Dei* (aka the Divine Office), manual labor, and *lectio divina*, a form of prayerful reading.





# OCSO

Robert, Alberic, and  
Stephen

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Armand Jean le  
Bouthillier – de Rancé

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# A way of hearing God's voice

- While much of our prayer is **speaking to God**, we often fail to **hear or listen to God**
- How do we “hear” or “listen to God’s voice”?



# 3 privileged sources of the divine voice

Nature

Experience

Sacred  
Scripture



# Another name for biblical study?

- In modern biblical study, we have learned much about what the text said in its original context and to its original audience. Since this is a complex investigation, we often rely on the voices of experts.
- In *lectio divina*, while the insights of modern biblical study are welcome, the purpose of reading is to hear what God is saying to the one who is praying.



# Two clarifications

- *Lectio divina* is not a form of flipping through the Bible to find a passage that “speaks” to me.
- *Lectio divina* falls into the realm of private revelation. What God says to the individual is for the individual. It is not a public message.

# *What is lectio divina?*

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Some definitions



# Some key concepts

- Since “idleness is the soul’s enemy,” St. Benedict prescribed manual labor and *lectio divina* as the antidote. (**Rule of Benedict 48:1**)
- “a daily meditation on scripture in which one reads not for knowledge or information, but to enhance one’s life of faith” (Kathleen Norris, **Amazing Grace**)
- “... God’s Word is heard and pondered... the monk/nun speaks heart to heart with God” (**Constitutions and Statutes of the Monks and Nuns of OCSO**)

# Key Concepts

- “*Lectio Divina*... is best understood... in relation to prayer and the life of prayer... a daily well-spring for our interior life, for contemplative prayer and union with God.” (Charles Dumont, **Praying the Word of God**)
- “*Lectio divina* is a technique of prayer and a guide to living... a means of descending to the level of the heart and of finding God.” (Michael Casey, **Sacred Reading**)
- “... a way of seeking Christ... consuming the broken bread... consuming the paschal lamb.” (Enzo Bianchi,



# Key concepts

- “...in *lectio divina*, prayer is personal, but not private or individualistic. The ‘reading’ is ‘divine’ because it is read in dialogue with God, the other. The two of you read together.” (Enzo Bianchi, **Praying the Word**)
- “Reading means a listening and watchful openness to the Word of God.” (Korneel Vermeiren, **Praying with Benedict**)
- “...the process is a gentle one... the encounter takes place without drama, as I quietly savor and relish the mystery of God’s caring presence.” (Charles Cummings, **Monastic Practices**)

# *The History of Lectio Divina*

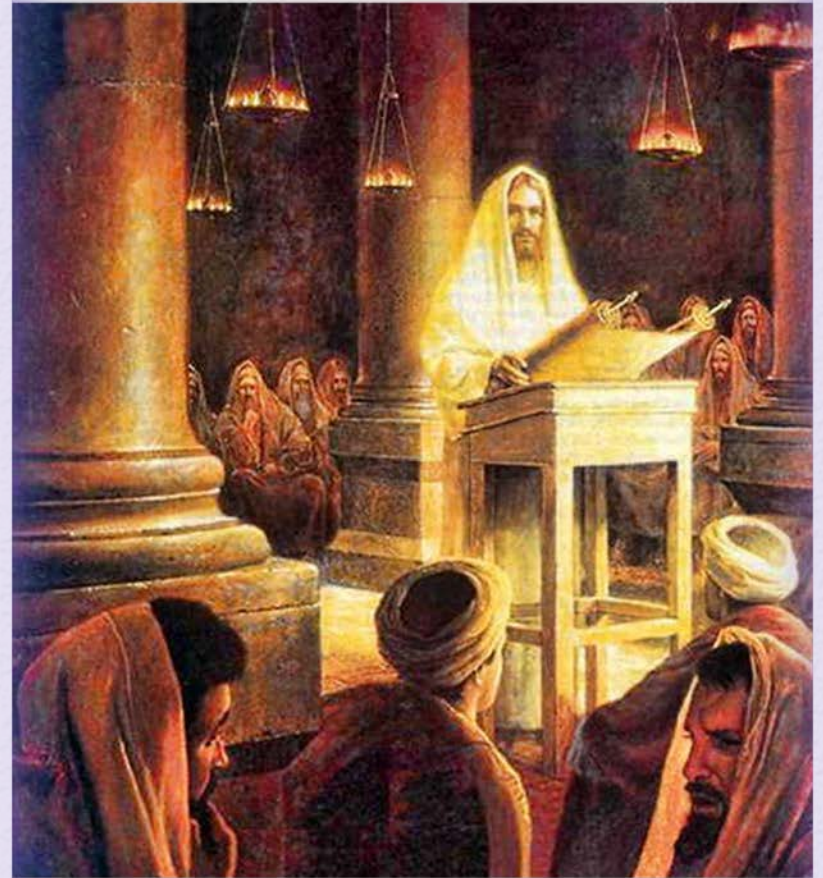
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Prior to St. Benedict, under  
the influence of Benedict, and  
into the modern time



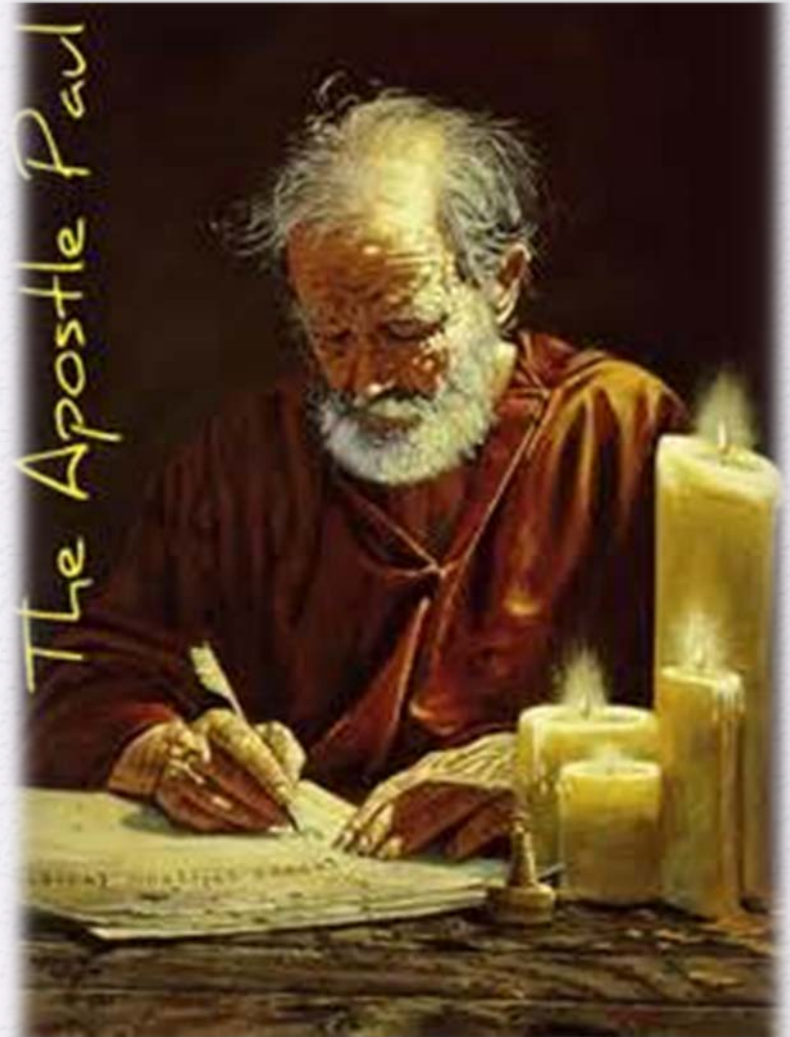
# Jewish antecedents

The pattern of praying  
the Word and using the  
word in prayer is found  
throughout Israel's  
tradition: Nehemiah 8;  
Luke 4



# Christian beginnings

Christians relied on the Jewish example and continued to reflect on the word in the liturgy, but also reflected on the word for guidance, wisdom, teaching, refutation, and training in righteousness (2 Tim 3:14-17)





# Eastern and Western Fathers

A deep reflection upon the biblical text was evident in the homilies and commentaries of the Eastern and Western Fathers, such as Augustine, Origen, and Athanasius. They set the stage for the Desert Fathers and Mothers





# Desert Fathers and Mothers

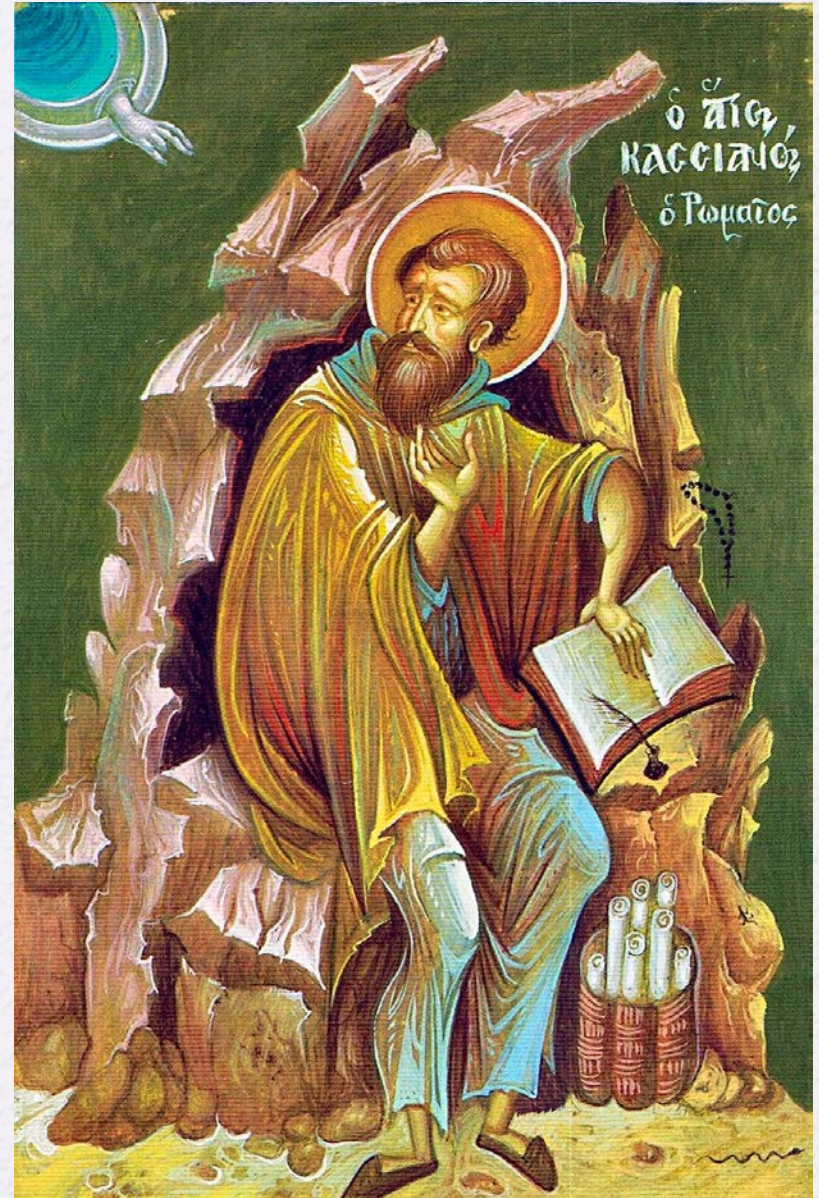
Following the pattern of St. Antony (251-356 AD), individuals went into the desert of Egypt and the Christian East. Some were solitaries and other cenobites, but all practiced a form of *lectio divina*. This prayerful “reading” bridged their manual labor and their liturgical prayer.





# John Cassian (360-435 AD)

Best known for his two written works: **The Conferences** and **The Institutes**, Cassian had a huge influence on St. Benedict. This is especially true regarding the “three renunciations” and the role played by “the thoughts”. It was from Cassian that Benedict learned how effective *lectio divina* was in dealing with the thoughts.





# Three renunciations

- 1. First, we must renounce our former way of life
- 2. Second, we must renounce our thoughts and our attachment to our thoughts
- 3. Third, we must renounce our very idea of God

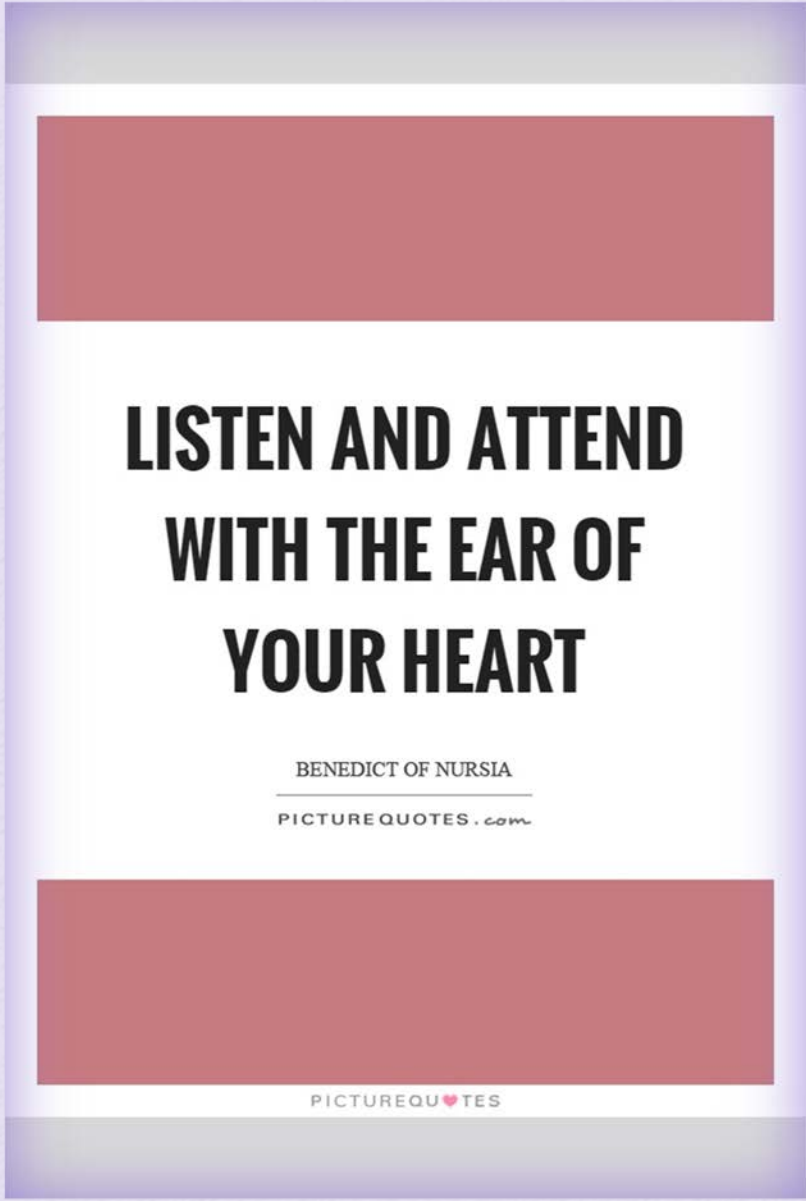


# Regarding the second renunciation

- Cassian identified eight thoughts that needed to be renounced: food, sex, things, anger, dejection, acedia, vainglory and pride
- St. Gregory the Great later collapsed these 8 thoughts into 7, and called them the Seven deadly sins.

# How is *lectio divina* related to this?

Monks were aware that there were clusters of thoughts that recurred over and over in the silence of their hearts. The wrestling with these thoughts was the negative strategy for controlling them; the positive strategy was to fill their minds with inspired and traditional prayer. The “inspired” prayer was *lectio divina*: listening to the Scriptures with the ear of their hearts.



**LISTEN AND ATTEND  
WITH THE EAR OF  
YOUR HEART**

BENEDICT OF NURSIA

PICTUREQUOTES.COM

PICTUREQUOTES



# Benedict of Nursia (480-543 AD)

Relying especially on the writings of John Cassian and other monastic rules, Benedict composed a rule of life that balanced prayer, work and reading. His rule came to dominate in the Christian West.





# Lenten practice



- St. Benedict incorporated *lectio divina* explicitly into his rule (chapter 48), where he noted that each monk was to receive a book for Lent that was to be read straight through from beginning to end.



# Reading at the time of St. Benedict

Benedict's was an era of limited literacy and very limited resources for reading. Works to be read were worth reading, and most frequently were biblical books



# The subsequent history of *Lectio Divina*

- *Lectio Divina* thrived in the medieval monastic world: Guigo II; St. Bernard of Clairvaux; William of St. Thierry (**Golden Epistle**)
- Individuals in the early medieval period, such as St. Francis of Assisi, practiced *lectio divina* as well



# Scholasticism and the High Middle Ages

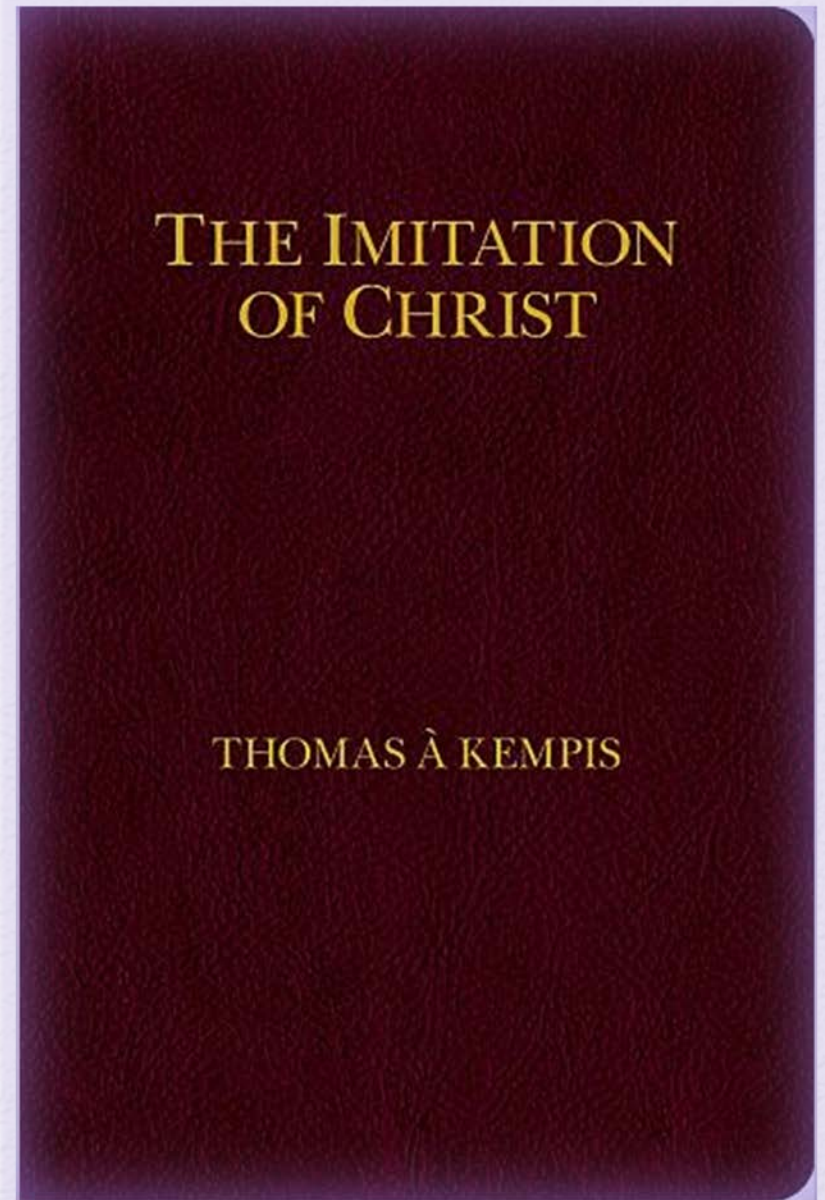
With the move from the monastery to the university, engagement with scripture moved from *lectio divina* to the method of *quaestio* and its *disputatio*. Thus, scripture was no longer a place of prayer, but rather an object of intellectual debate.



# Devotio Moderna

In the late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> centuries, a renewal of apostolic life called Devotio Moderna, emphasized pious practices such as obedience and simplicity of life.

Focusing on inner devotions and short periods of meditation, its classic work was the **Imitation of Christ**.





# The slow demise of *lectio divina*

- While *lectio divina* maintained some presence in monastic houses, even there it was often replaced by more popular and contemporary spiritualities: books of piety, Ignatian forms of spirituality, and spiritualities under the guidance of a spiritual director.
- Since *lectio divina* is a form of prayer that is ***neither devotional, nor directed by a director***, it was often looked upon with suspicion.

# The Renewal of *Lectio Divina*

It was with the renewal of religious life at the Second Vatican Council that *Lectio Divina* reclaimed its rightful place in monastic life. With a renewed emphasis on productive silence, individual cells, and time dedicated to meditation, the time was ripe for a return to *lectio divina*.





# The Method of Lectio Divina

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Drawn from Enzo Bianchi

# Some initial pitfalls

As in cooking there is  
a need for flexibility

Don't expect  
immediate results

Watch for the  
constantly changing  
dynamics





# A fuller method of practicing Lectio Divina

1. The preparation for *lectio*
2. The Practice of *lectio*
3. The challenges of *lectio*

# The Preparation for *lectio*

A set time

A separate practice

A proper ambience

A proper posture

A proper  
preparation





# The practice of *lectio divina* (E. Bianchi)

Call on the Holy Spirit

Open the Bible and read (*lectio*)

Search by meditating (*meditatio*,  
*cogitatio*, *studium*)

Pray to the Lord who has spoken to  
you (*oratio*)

Contemplate (*contemplatio*)

Keep the Word in your heart

To listen means to obey



# Thoughts on *Lectio* by Kathleen Norris

The effect of *lectio* and the relationship it strengthens is most central; it is a way of life; it is about slowing down, chewing over the words and letting them work on us; this practice has profound communal ramifications; *Lectio* results in a good, healthy, open silence, a freeing silence that might lead a person anywhere





# The challenges of *lectio*

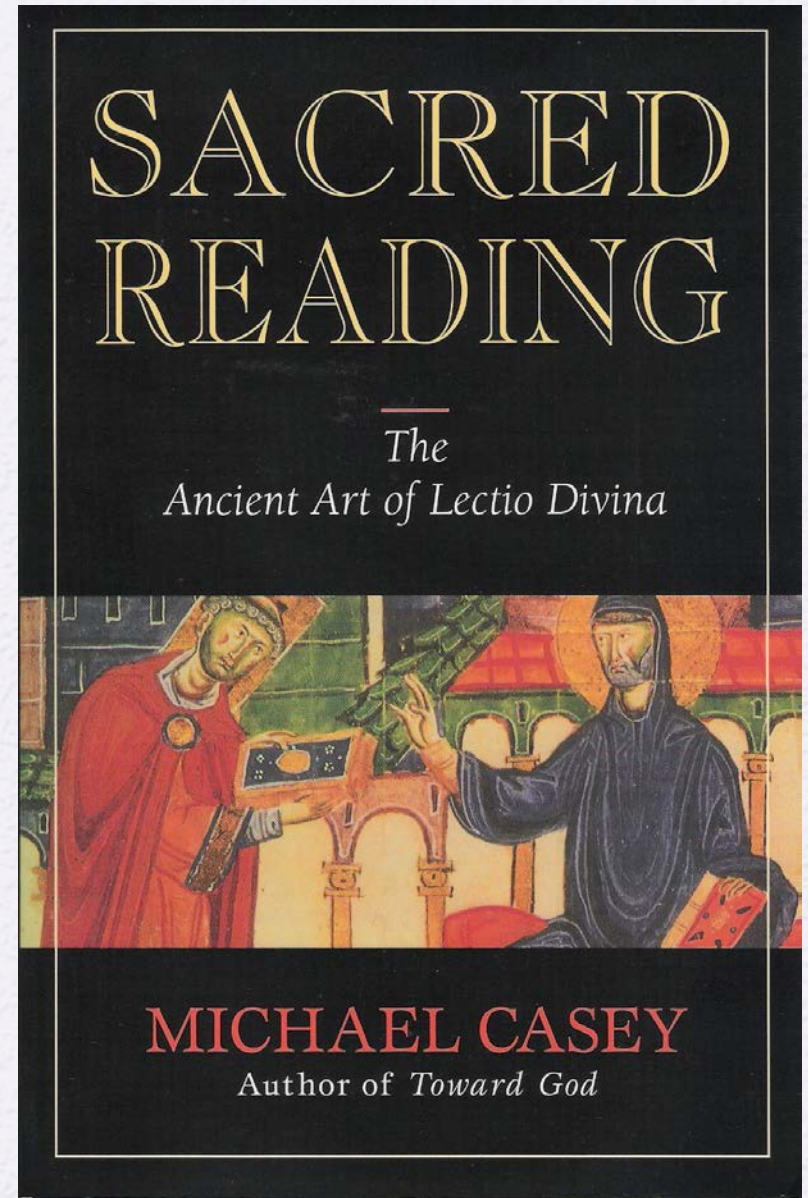
Reading that is prayer

Avoiding drowsiness

Individual versus  
corporate reading

What if God is silent?

External and inner  
noise



# *A simple form of Lectio Divina*

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Based on the daily Gospel  
Reading



# Step #1

After invoking the Holy Spirit to be with you in your reading, read the daily gospel reading through one time slowly and deliberately. Then read it a second time, even more slowly, allowing the words to strike you, and with less focus on the overall message meaning.

man. & 14 And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of man be lifted up, 15 that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."h

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.

17 For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him. 18 He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already,

# Step #2

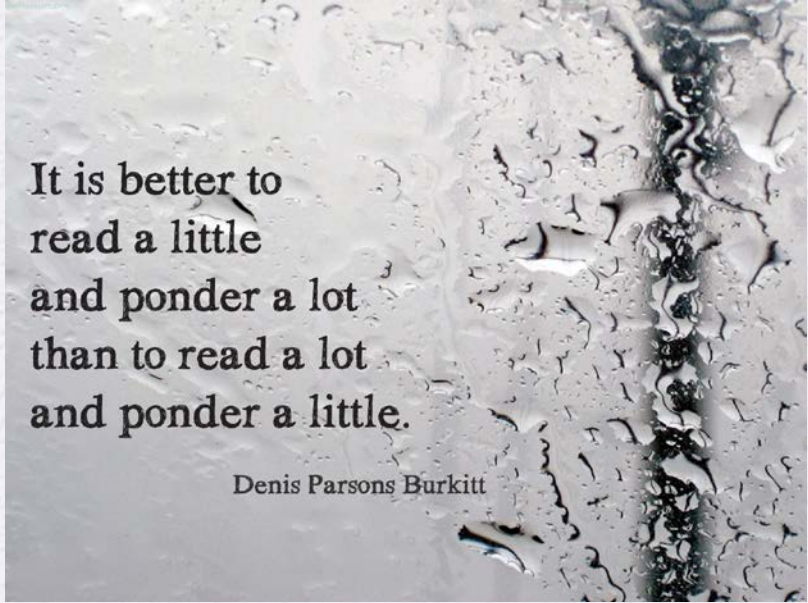
Read through the text even more slowly, and on a separate piece of paper, write down whatever word or phrase strikes you for whatever reason.





# Step #3

Go back and sit with each word, trying to “hear” the reason that it struck you or gave you pause. After you’ve reflected on a word for a bit, move on to the next. Don’t try to overanalyze any particular word.

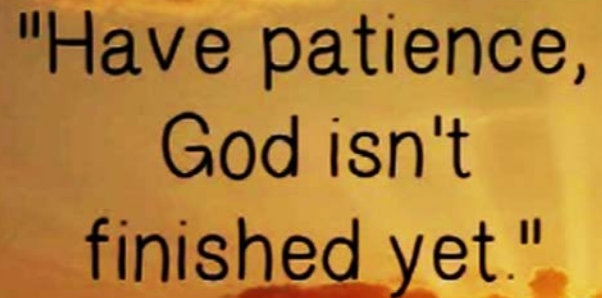


It is better to  
read a little  
and ponder a lot  
than to read a lot  
and ponder a little.

Denis Parsons Burkitt

# Step #4

Once you have reflected upon each word or phrase, go back and read the passage again, moving through the text slowly and deliberately, allowing each word to speak.



"Have patience,  
God isn't  
finished yet."

Philippians 1:6



# Step #5

If you feel so inclined, write about whatever this passage has formed in your mind. You could write it to yourself in the form of a journal entry, write it in the form of a prayer to God, write down the word or phrase that you intend to keep mulling over throughout the course of the day, or even write it impersonally, as if writing for someone else.



# Concluding remarks

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Final suggestions and  
questions



# Some practical suggestions

- 1. Some thoughts about silence (internal is more important than external)
- 2. Some thoughts about time: be realistic, try to find a regular time, set a timer, and stick to it
- 3. Be patient, and try to get past the idea that this is about “accomplishing something”

# Some more practical suggestions

- Trust that if you enter this practice in good faith, God will respond
- You can only read so much **about** *lectio divina*. It is a form of prayer and you must do it for yourself – no one can do it for you
- Respect *lectio* for what it is, and what it is not
- You and God are in this together – a spiritual director can't direct you through *lectio*



# Some questions

- Can *lectio* be combined with homily preparation?
- Does *lectio* stand in opposition to biblical study, analysis, and exegesis?
- Can works other than the Bible serve as proper material for *lectio divina*?
- Must I do introductory study of a biblical book before I engage in *lectio divina*?
- Is journaling required?

# Suggested resources: online

- “The Lectio Divina Homepage, by Richard McCambly, ocsa ([www.lectio-divina.org](http://www.lectio-divina.org))
- “Lectio Divina”
- (<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/category/category/lectio-divina>)
- “How to practice Lectio Divina” by Fr. Luke Dysinger, OSB  
([www.beliefnet.com/faiths/catholic/2000/08/how-to-practice-lectio-divina.aspx](http://www.beliefnet.com/faiths/catholic/2000/08/how-to-practice-lectio-divina.aspx))
- “Ever Ancient, Ever New: The Art and Practice of *Lectio Divina*  
([www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catechesis/catechetical-sunday/word-of-god/upload/lectio-divina.pdf](http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/how-we-teach/catechesis/catechetical-sunday/word-of-god/upload/lectio-divina.pdf))



# Suggested Resources: Books

- Bianchi, Enzo. **Praying the Word: An Introduction to *Lectio Divina***. Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1992, 1998.
- Bianchi, Enzo. **Echoes of the Word: A New Kind of Monk on the Meaning of Life**. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2013.
- Casey, Michael. **Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of *Lectio Divina***. Liguori, MO: Liguori / Triumph, 1995, 1996.
- Casey, Michael. **Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer**. Liguori, MO: Liguori / Triumph, 1996.
- Chittister, Joan. **Wisdom distilled from the Daily: Living the Rule of St. Benedict Today**. San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1990.
- Chittister, Joan. **The Rule of Benedict: Insights for the Ages**. New York, NY: Crossroad, 1992/2001.

# Suggested Resources: Books

- Cummings, Charles. **Monastic Practices.** Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1986.
- Dumont, Charles. **Praying the Word of God: The use of *lectio divina*.** Oxford, UK: SLG Press, 1999.
- Funk, Mary Margaret. **Thoughts Matter: The Practice of the Spiritual Life.** New York, NY: Continuum, 1998.
- Funk, Mary Margaret. **Lectio Matters: Before the Burning Bush.** Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013.
- Magrassi, Mariano. **Praying the Bible: An Introduction to *Lectio Divina*.** Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990, 1998.
- Norris, Kathleen. **Amazing Grace: A Vocabulary of Faith.** New York, NY: Riverhead Books, 1998.



# Suggested Resources: Books

- Vermeiren, Korneel. **Praying with Benedict: Prayer in the Rule of St. Benedict.** Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1980 and 1999.
- Vest, Norvene. **Gathered in the Word: Praying the Scripture in Small Groups.** Nashville, TN: Upper Room Books, 1996/1999.
- Vest, Norvene. **No Moment Too Small: Rhythms of Silence, Prayer, and Holy Reading.** Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1994.