



contemplation. We simply end our prayer by receiving and accepting the transforming embrace of the One who has led us to the quiet moment.

## 5 ACTING

After prayerfully listening to God through a passage of Scripture, we are challenged and moved to make a difference in the way we live. In addition to drawing us inward to reflection and prayer, the word of God impels us outward to those people and situations in need of God's light and compassionate presence. By acting on Scripture we become, as James says, "doers of the word, and not hearers only" (Jas 1:22).

Active change in our lives



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is the fruit of *lectio divina*. Occasionally, the changes are remarkable; more often, they are subtle. As we open ourselves to encountering Christ through revealed spiritual practices such as *lectio divina*, we gradually become aware that the fruit of studying the Bible is the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control" (Gal 5:22-23).

When we begin to notice this fruit in the way we live each day, we will know that the word of God is working within us. We become more effective members of the body of Christ in the world and witnesses to God's kingdom.

### *The Work of the Holy Spirit*

- + *The Holy Spirit enables us to experience the Bible as God's living word.*
- + *The Holy Spirit guides us toward a deeper understanding of the Scriptures.*
- + *The Holy Spirit motivates our response to God's word.*



The Crosiers

At the heart of this practice is an understanding of the Bible's inspiration — that God is the Author or source of Scripture. Though human writers wrote Scripture in various periods of history, God's Spirit moved within the writers so that the biblical words speak God's word to his people. But "inspiration" doesn't refer just to the work of God's Spirit at the time the texts were written. It is an ongoing reality within the sacred pages. The Scriptures *remain* inspired, and when we read them in faith today, we discover that they are filled with the Spirit of God.

### FOR FURTHER READING

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Martin, George. *Reading God's Word Today* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2009).

Sammons, Eric. *Who Is Jesus Christ?* (Our Sunday Visitor, 2010).

Binz, Stephen J. *Ancient-Future Bible Study Series* (Brazos Press).

———. *Threshold Bible Study Series* (Twenty-Third Publications).

———. *Conversing with God in Scripture: A Contemporary Approach to Lectio Divina* (Word Among Us Press, 2008).

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# The Secret to Making Scripture Come Alive

## The Practice of *Lectio Divina*



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*They said to each other, "Were not our hearts burning within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?"*

— Luke 24:32

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As followers of Jesus, we want to know how to read Scripture in a way that makes a tangible difference in our lives. We want to know how the inspired texts can be personal, helpful, challenging, comforting, and life-changing.

Fortunately, we can achieve this without having to master new, creative methods for making the Bible more relevant to life today. Rather we will find the means to fulfilling this desire in one of the most ancient treasures of the Church: the spiritual practice of *lectio divina* (sacred reading).

The roots of the Christian practice of *lectio divina* are found in the Jewish tradition in which the Scriptures manifest the presence of God through reading, meditation, and prayer. This way of reading Scripture was nurtured through the centuries of Christianity, especially through the desert fathers and mothers, the patristic writers, and the monastic tradition.

But *lectio divina* is not a rigid system or a set of required steps for reading the Bible. It is, rather, a way of approaching the sacred text with faith, openheartedness, reverence, and expectation. The reader trusts that God is present and speaks to his people through the inspired word, working profoundly within our minds and hearts.

*The Essence of Lectio Divina*

- + *Lectio divina is a personal encounter with God through Scripture.*
- + *Lectio divina establishes a dialogue between the reader of Scripture and God.*
- + *Lectio divina aims at heart-to-heart intimacy with God.*

For our purposes, then, we will describe the process of *lectio divina* with five simple terms: listening, understanding, reflecting, praying, and acting.

### 1 LISTENING

Reading a sacred text with expectancy, trusting that God will speak his word to us through the page, is best described as a deep listening. In his monastic *Rule*, St. Benedict described this kind of reading as hearing “with the ear of our heart”: God speaks and we listen.



The key to this deep listening is reading the biblical text with as little prejudgment as possible — as if we were hearing it for the first time. We can’t listen fully to God if we think we already know what the text is going to tell us. Rather, this expectant reading requires that we create a space within ourselves for the new insight and wisdom God wants to give us through the sacred page.

*If the practice of lectio divina is effectively promoted, I am convinced that it will bring to the church a new spiritual springtime.*

— Pope Benedict XVI

This deep listening requires careful, fully attentive reading, engaging our mind, our imagination, our emotions, and our will. It can be helpful to read aloud, so that we see the words with our eyes, form them with our lips, and hear them with our ears. We savor the words of the sacred literature, appreciating the images, envisioning the scene, feeling the sentiments, and allowing the words to move from our heads to our hearts.

### 2 UNDERSTANDING

The Church’s early theologians show us that there is no clear distinction between studying Scripture and reading it prayerfully. The more we come to understand the text with our minds, the more we are capable of being changed by it.

Grasping the full meaning of the text is easier and more meaningful when we know something of the Scripture’s original context — historical, cultural,

literary, and religious. When, where, and why was the author writing? Most importantly, how did the writer’s faith manifest itself in the text, and what kind of faith response does the writer expect from the reader?

Seeking to understand the faith dimension of the text helps us transcend the original circumstances in which it was written and allows us to see the lasting significance and validity it has for all of us.

Bible studies and biblical commentaries can be a great help to increasing our understanding — as can reading the Bible with companion guides, studying the forewords of the books being read, or paying careful attention to the footnotes used in the Bible to explain key themes and references. **Listening to the text with the understanding of the Church and some basic insights of biblical scholarship can assure us that we’re getting a true, accurate, and faithful understanding of the text.** This listening to the text for understanding, with its multiple layers of meaning and rich history of interpretation, forms the foundation on which we can begin to experience its transforming potential.

*Learn to know the heart of God in the words of God.*

— St. Gregory the Great



### 3 REFLECTING

Even though the Bible was written ages ago, its pages always have meanings and messages for us today. Our challenge is to find connections between the text of yesterday

and the “today” of our lives. By reflecting on the sacred texts, we link the biblical truth of scriptural passages to the experience of faith in the world in which we live.

Because biblical literature is the word of God, it holds meaning for people in every age and culture. Its personal message can be received by every reader who listens to the word in the context of his or her daily experiences. **We should read the text until it becomes like a mirror, reflecting some of our own thoughts, questions, challenges, and experiences.**

Mary of Nazareth is the best model for this type of reflecting on God’s word: “Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Lk 2:19). “Pondering” suggests that the word being reflected upon has enough gravity to shape and expand the understanding of our hearts. The word of God can form our hearts when we



allow it to rest within us and gradually mold our desires, insights, and judgments.

### 4 PRAYING

After listening carefully and reflectively to God’s word in Scripture, we naturally reach a point where we want to respond. Prayer is our heartfelt response to God’s word. **In this way, *lectio divina* becomes a dialogue with God: we listen to God, then we respond to God in prayer.**

Our prayerful response to God flows directly from our biblical reading, understanding, and reflecting. Our prayer is enriched through the vocabulary, images, and sentiments of the biblical text as it is joined with our own thoughts, needs, and desires. As a grace-filled and Spirit-led response to God, our prayer becomes increasingly personal and intimate.

After responding to God with word-filled prayer, words gradually become less helpful and unnecessary. We are then often led by God into a wordless silence, an effortless resting in God’s presence. This type of prayer is traditionally called

