

who speaks to us through the pages of the inspired text, inviting from us a personal response and a gradual transformation of life.

The heart of this practice is an understanding of the Bible's inspiration, the belief that God is the Author, or source, of Scripture. Though written by human writers 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 does not just refer 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 read in faith today, they are filled with the Spirit of God.

The ancient art of 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.

Throughout history this practice of sacred reading has taken many forms through the writings of the saints and spiritual masters. Words such as *lectio, cogitatio, meditatio, compassio, oratio, contemplatio, consolatio, discretio, deliberatio, and operatio* have filled books of spiritual literature to express aspects of this ancient practice. Lectio Divina Bible Study utilizes five terms to describe these movements and lead readers into a transforming experience: listening, understanding, reflecting, praying, and acting.

LISTENING

Reading a sacred text in this tradition means reading with expectancy, trusting that God will speak his word to us through the page. St. Benedict, in his monastic *Rule*, 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 prejudice 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.

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, allowing the words to move from our heads to our hearts.

UNDERSTANDING

Seeking to comprehend the meaning of a text is an important part of encountering God and being changed by that encounter. 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 the text.

We will be able to probe the fullest meaning of the text the more we comprehend something of its 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 understanding. Listening to the text with the understanding of the church and with some basic insights of biblical scholarship can assure us that our comprehension is true and faithful. 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.

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 the biblical literature is the word of God, it has a richness of meaning that can be discovered by individuals in every age and in every 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 treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). To "ponder" suggests that the word has enough gravity to shape and expand the understanding of the heart. The word of God can form our hearts when we allow it to rest within us and gradually mold our desires, insights, and judgments.

PRAYING

After listening carefully and reflectively to God's word in Scripture, we naturally reach a point in which we want to respond. Prayer is our heartfelt response to God's word. In this way, lectio divina becomes fundamentally 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. In this way our prayer is enriched through the vocabulary, images, and sentiments of the biblical text as it is joined with the thoughts, needs, and desires arising within us. 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 contemplation. We simply end our prayer by receiving and accepting the transforming embrace of the One who has led us to the quiet moment.

ACTING

Every biblical passage offers a call, or challenge, to those who listen to its sacred words. After prayerfully listening to God through a passage of Scripture, we should be impacted in a way that makes 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 merely hearers" (James 1:22).

These active changes in our lives are the fruit of lectio divina. Occasionally the changes are remarkable; more often they are subtle. We gradually become aware that the fruit of studying the Bible is the fruit of the Spirit: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (Galatians 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.

Personal Use of Lectio Divina Bible Study

- Make Bible study a regular part of your life. Study one lesson each day, or as often as you can according to the circumstances of your life.
- Find a regular time during the day that can become a pattern for you. Choose a quiet and comfortable place where you will be undisturbed.
- Make your time for study a sacred time. Set it apart by calling on the guidance of the Holy Spirit.
- Study slowly and carefully. Don't hesitate to mark up this book with notes, highlights, underlining, circles, or whatever will help you pay attention and remember the text and commentary.
- Follow the movements of lectio divina outlined in each lesson. Realize that this is only a tentative guide for the more important movements of God's Spirit within you.
- Write out your responses as suggested in the lesson. The act of writing will help you clarify your thoughts, deepen your understanding, and bring new insights.
- Approach your study with expectancy, trusting that God will indeed work deeply within you through his word.
- Try to be accountable to at least one other person for your regular practice of lectio divina. Tell a friend, spouse, spiritual director, or pastor about your experience in order to receive encouragement and affirmation.