

Item #19 (Lectio Divina)

This was Entry #20 in my previous website, “James Swetnam’s Close Readings”.

For many years I have been engaged in presenting texts of Sacred Scripture to be approached according to the method of “Lectio Divina”. Literally, this Latin phrase means “Divine Reading”, but these words give an inadequate idea of what “Lectio Divina” really means, for the “reading” meant is much more than that which we usually do in the course of a day. “Reading” the divine text of Scripture means putting ourselves into contact with the sphere of God—the Divine Persons—in as profound a way as possible, a way involving our whole heart, as explained below. Hence it is better to keep the phrase “Lectio Divina” as it stands written in the Latin, untranslated, so that the unique force of the meaning can be maintained by the unique force of its identification.

Lectio Divina is a way of reading/praying Scripture which can be traced back through early Christian times to the Judaism of the pre-Christian era. For persons who have a strong faith in God's prior initiative in contacting all humans, it is a traditional way of replying. God's communication arrives for the Catholic through Scripture as it is understood against the background of the Tradition of the Roman Church. For contemporary persons of faith, Catholics included, this communication from God is not always easy to respond to. The reasons for this are varied, but one principal reason is the increasingly triumphant media consumerism of the contemporary world: the flood of information and entertainment is so overwhelming in its power to distract and confuse and mesmerize—and secularize!—that only an intelligent, principled and determined effort can enable a believer to make the response to God's Word which God desires. Much of the “secular” media is of course precisely that: secular. This means that it ignores or minimizes the transcendent dimension of human existence—God. But *Lectio Divina* is above all concerned with the transcendent, divine dimension of human existence, and how that transcendent dimension affects our lives in this world.

Lectio Divina is a way of reading/praying Scripture which has various aspects. These aspects are not to be regarded as stages that are separated from each other. Rather, they are viewpoints of a single act which is at once simple and complex: simple, because it is basically an attempt to respond to God's Word with all my *heart*; complex, because it is basically an attempt to respond to God's Word with *all* my heart. In

the concrete act of *Lectio Divina* these aspects can be distinguished from each other but not separated. As distinguished, they can be made the focal point of attention. But they all have one common essential element: **all acts of *Lectio Divina* take place in the context of faith.** The deeper the faith, the more profound the reception of God's message conveyed in the Word and the more authentic the response.

All *Lectio Divina* should be viewed as an indirect participation in the liturgy, i.e., it is connected with the worship of God. (*Lectio Divina* has as its ultimate goal the "sanctity" of those who make use of it; and "sanctity" in the Judaeo-Christian tradition means the not being unfit to stand in God's presence.) Further, as used and explained in contemporary Catholic life, *Lectio Divina* has a wide range of interpretations. Each has its own particular value. The interpretation given in this presentation does not pretend to exhaust all the possible riches of Scripture when Scripture is approached under the rubric of *Lectio Divina*.

Aspect One: *Lectio*. This aspect consists in the repeated reading of a passage of Scripture in order to understand the original meaning which the original authors, human and divine, intended that it convey. The text should be read again and again. In the *Lectio* we try to understand the passage in its original context. The more specific the context, the better: historical, geographical, cultural, literary—above all, religious. In what context was the original author writing? That is: When was he writing? Where was he writing? In what circumstances was he writing? How does his faith manifest itself in the text? What faith response does he expect from the persons he was addressing? What kind of faith is he portraying in the persons and events he is writing about. In this aspect of "*Lectio*", scholarly commentaries can be of considerable help, though their frequent lack of explicit attention to the faith dimension must be kept in mind. The faith dimension is crucial. The faith dimension transcends the original circumscribed conditions in which the text was composed and has universal and lasting validity. Continued re-reading with God's help can make possible our understanding this faith dimension and the religious point which is at its center. Further, such re-reading in

faith can help us place this point in the context of the entire Bible. How does the Spirit, the ultimate author of this passage and of all Scripture, want this passage to fit in to the rest of what He has inspired in the tradition of the Roman Catholic Church? (Note well: in the last 200 years a huge amount of information has been gathered about the text of the Bible and the places and times in which it was written. "Lectio" does not consist in learning as many facts as possible about the Bible, but in understanding with the help of the Spirit how these facts help us understand the faith-dimension of the persons the text talks about in terms of the text and context.)

Aspect Two: *Meditatio*. This aspect consists in an attempt to understand what the *relevance* of the original meaning of a text has for me today. It consists in reflection on the lasting purpose of the text—the original religious point of the human and divine authors—that transcends the temporal and spatial limitations of the text's original setting by reason of the faith dimension. *Meditatio* seeks to know what the text indicates to me as a believer of today with regard to how I live. In order to make sure that God is the One Who is speaking to me in a text, I have to make sure that what seems relevant for today is linked to the original meaning. 1) *Lectio*: the original meaning. 2) *Meditatio*: the relevance of that meaning for today. What is the relevance for today of the religious point which the authors, human and divine, were making in the text in its all-important faith dimension for the people of their day? How am I addressed by this religious point which is communicated through a reading of the text in faith? How were the original addressees expected by God to respond then? How am I expected to respond now as a believing member of the Catholic Church? After having relied on the help of the Holy Spirit in arriving at a faith-understanding of the original meaning, now I rely on the help of the same Holy Spirit for a faith-understanding of how that original meaning should play out in my life. God's Holy Spirit and I work that out together in prayer.

Aspect Three: *Oratio*. This aspect consists of prayer that arises spontaneously from the *Lectio* and from the *Meditatio*. It is an unscripted reaction of the heart of a believer in response to a text

written by a believer and addressed to believers. It is a plea spoken directly to God for His help in understanding what He is saying and in responding as He wishes us to respond. In this way the *Oratio* can encompass pleas for a great variety of virtues, as well as for many other gifts. The Spirit inspired the text with just such pleas in mind. Hence the Spirit is ready to respond to such pleas. But *Oratio* is not something that remains only internal. It is ordered ultimately also to what is external, to the way we live our faith in all the dimensions of our life. Here we are at the heart of true prayer: as a person I address the Persons of the Father through Christ in the Spirit.

Aspect Four: *Contemplatio*. This aspect consists in adoration, praise and silence in faith before the God Who is communicating with me as result of my attempts to come to grips with His word. I "soak up" this communication so that it becomes a part of me. When I am intrigued by a beautiful sunset I instinctively spend time contemplating what I see so that it can become a part of my lifetime experience of beauty. When I am intrigued by a meaningful insight into Scripture with regard to how I should live my faith life I instinctively spend time contemplating what I see so that it can become a part of my lifetime experience of following Christ. This prayerful contemplation results in my standing before almighty God with my heart exposed, so that the initiative is with Him, so that with His help the fruit of my prayer may become a part of me. Contemplation results in an attitude of listening with my heart. "Heart" here is to be understood in the Semitic sense of the center of my being, that point at which my memory, intellect, will, affections, imagination meet and where "I" am really "I". It is where I make my choices before God. My heart in this sense is made up of all my past choices. I am the result of all of my past free choices.

The heart is the dwelling-place where I am, where I live; according to the Semitic or Biblical expression, the heart is the place "to which I withdraw." The heart is our hidden center, beyond the grasp of our reason and of others; only the Spirit of God can fathom the human heart and know it fully. The heart is the place of decision, deeper than our psychic drives. It is the

place of truth, where we choose life or death. It is the place of encounter, because as image of God we live in relation: it is the place of covenant. (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2563)

Christian prayer is a covenant relationship between God and man in Christ. It is the action of God and of man, springing forth from both the Holy Spirit and ourselves, wholly directed to the Father, in union with the human will of the Son of God made man. (*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §2564)

True contemplation will reveal my heart more and more to me because it reveals God more and more to me. True contemplation will help me see who I really am and who I am destined to be in God's sight. True contemplation will work towards a transformation of my heart through contact with the Divine Persons. Christ is the privileged center of Christian contemplation, for it is through Christ that I go to the Father in the Spirit: in knowing Christ, I know the Father as Christ's brother or sister and as the Father's child. To the extent that I know Christ, the Father reveals to me my identity as it is now and as He wants it to be through the action of the Spirit in my life. To the extent that *Contemplatio* functions, it protects the entire process of *Lectio Divina* from the danger of imposing on my heart a narrow interpretation of who I am. For only the Trinity really knows who I am, and in the *Contemplatio* the persons of the Trinity reveal my identity to me. In *Contemplatio* God has the last word.

Contemplation in *Lectio Divina*, in other words, results in a transformation of the one reading/praying the Scriptures. *Contemplation*, like *Oratio*, focuses on the persons in the biblical text, human or divine, who are crucial for my becoming at home in the world of the Trinity.

Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio, Contemplatio. Four interconnected aspects of a prayerful approach to God through Christ in replying to His initiative in reaching out to me in Scripture as written, transmitted and

interpreted in the Catholic Church. With it I am writing the story of my life. (2 July 2011)