

# Lay Dominican Inquiry Formation

## July

### ***THE PILLARS OF DOMINICAN LIFE: MEDITATION AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER***

Union with God is the goal of the spiritual life. This union with God will, in turn, enrich and perfect our “active” life (preaching, teaching, giving alms, etc.) thereby making it more effective and enabling it to bear more fruit. That is why contemplative prayer and meditation is essential in the life of a Dominican. Our “active” life is really a sharing of the fruits of our study, meditating and contemplative life. The “active” life or “outward” life flows from the fullness of the “study and prayer” life, or “inward” life. You can be sure that without study or union with God, your active life will not grow and flourish to the fullness of the capability God intended. St. Catherine of Siena reminds us; *“If you are what you should be, you will set the whole world on fire”*. Meditation and contemplation help us to accomplish this goal.

First, meditation uses the mind and imagination to stir the heart to Christ. For example, you’re pondering scripture and use your imagination to put yourself in the scene. You think about it, analyze it, reflect on it, and use your emotions to get fully involved. Let’s say you’re meditating on John 11:1 where Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead. You might imagine that you’re one of the crowd watching the dramatic event. Think about what that would be like to be there and see Jesus perform that miracle. You would be amazed and awed and filled with wonder and joy. Your thoughts, imagination and emotions would be fully engaged. That experience of mediation will draw your heart closer to Jesus. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains meditation this way: “Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion and desire. This mobilization of faculties is necessary in order to deepen our convictions of faith, prompt

the conversion of our heart, and strengthen our will to follow Christ. Christian prayer tries above all to meditate on the mysteries of Christ, as in *Lectio Divina* or the rosary. This form of prayerful reflection is of great value, but Christian prayer should go further: to the knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, to union with Him” (which is contemplation, as we shall see later).

One method of meditation that seems to fit in with the Dominican tradition is nearly as old as the Church. It is called *Lectio Divina*, or in English “divine” or “sacred reading”. This goes back to the Fathers of the Desert in the 300’s and it was a method used by our holy father, St. Dominic. In fact, St. Dominic always carried with him the Gospel of St. Matthew and the Epistles of St. Paul. This is noted as the eighth of his nine ways of prayer. We are told that he would sit down to read. Sitting there he would open up some book before him, usually the Scriptures or Fathers of the Church. He would begin with the sign of the cross and then start reading. He would pause from time to time to reflect on the words before him, often expressing his response to what he was reading with a conversation with God, using physical gestures and reactions of his heart.

This is a most effective way to meditate for Dominicans, both religious and lay. Whenever possible, it’s best to meditate while sitting before the Blessed Sacrament. In this way you will not only be meditating on the Word of God, but also absorbing His Grace at the same time. This will bring your meditative prayer to a much deeper understanding of the Truth. When you are unable to go to Church, choose

a quiet place in your home where you can go to every day. Get into a comfortable physical position, one in which aching knees or a sore back will not interfere with your prayer. Then, quiet yourselves both exteriorly and interiorly, or, in other words, we should serene our souls. Then we pick up the Scriptures, let us say, and turn to some passage that appeals to us and begin to read. When we are struck with some words we linger over them, reflect prayerfully on them letting our hearts be moved to acts of love, flowing into resolutions to live more fully the truths we have been reflecting upon. Then when we have exhausted the meaning of that particular passage we move on to the next and continue the process for as long as we can or want to. As a starter, the eighth chapter of St. Paul's letter to the Romans is recommended. Another great passage is the thirteenth chapter of St. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, the hymn to love. The entire letter to the Ephesians is marvelous for it is filled with so many beautiful thoughts that we can reflect upon and be moved to love God more.

Another book of the New Testament that we should appreciate more is the first letter of St. Peter. It is marvelous and provides so much material for prayerful reflection. Psalm 104 is one of the richest of all the psalms for not only prayerful but joyful reflection. There are other books besides the Bible that can be most helpful, such as Thomas a Kempis "The Imitation of Christ". But at first it is best to stick to the Scriptures. There is enough material for meditation in them to last a lifetime. They also have the benefit of being the Word of God. Through them, God speaks to us.

One thing is certain. You are going to have bad days when nothing seems to go right. You sit there and look at the passage and nothing comes. Your mind is blank, or you are off in a maze of distractions. You might even fall asleep. But do not worry about it. You want to love God and you are trying. God loves you for the effort as poor as it may seem. This reminds us of a story about St. Teresa of Avila, who was such a down to earth person.

She kept falling asleep in meditation and this worried her. She felt she was failing in a most important spiritual exercise. But she resolved it when the thought came to her, "God loves me just as much when I am asleep as when I am awake" and she never worried again.

Despite the bad days you may have which may discourage you, do not give up the effort. Eventually, you will find that its rewards are well worth any effort you put out.

We have gone into this at some length because of the importance of meditation in our spiritual lives. You are urged to try to get in some meditation or Lectio Divina sometime during the day. This may involve taking a close look at your priorities and asking, for example, how much time are you spending in watching television, which is a great consumer of time for so many people. Or how much time do we spend in reading books or magazines that are basically fluff. We might ask ourselves: could some of that time be spent in an activity that will have everlasting benefits for our immortal souls, make us more pleasing to God, and which will bring us closer to Jesus.

Our second form of prayer is contemplation. Contemplation differs from meditation in that contemplation is not an activity of the mind reflecting on ideas. In contemplative prayer, the mind is beholding a mystery and simply gazes at Jesus. Remember when you were a child and you would go outside on a warm summer's night and gaze up at the stars. You would behold the vast array and the beauty of the stars. You weren't thinking or analyzing it, but simply wrapped up in it all. That's what contemplative prayer is like except instead of gazing at the stars, you gaze at Jesus. In this form of prayer our focus is on Jesus rather than the scene in scripture. It moves us closer to Him. It would be something like this; when we were meditating on the scene of Jesus raising Lazarus we were taking in the whole scene and thinking about it and reacting to it. Well think about that same person in the crowd who, after witnessing this scene, has his heart drawn to Jesus and he walks

up close to Him and just gazes at Him face to face. He's not thinking about Lazarus or anyone else right now. He just walks right up to Jesus and gazes. And Jesus gazes back. That's contemplation. It's a step closer. It's more intimate. The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains it this way: "Contemplation is a gaze of faith, fixed on Jesus. "I look at him and he looks at me": this is what a certain peasant of Ars used to say to his holy cure about his prayer before the tabernacle. This focus on Jesus is a renunciation of self. His gaze purifies our heart; the light of the countenance of Jesus illumines the eyes of our heart and teaches us to see everything in the light of his truth and his compassion for all men. Contemplation also turns its gaze on the mysteries of the life of Christ. Thus it learns the interior knowledge of our Lord, the more to love Him and follow Him".

St. Thomas Aquinas notes the importance of contemplative prayer and the transforming effect it has on our active life:

"The work of the active life is twofold. One proceeds from the fullness of contemplation, such as teaching and preaching...And this work is more excellent than simple contemplation. For even as it is better to enlighten than merely to shine, so is it better to give to others the fruits of one's contemplation than merely to contemplate. The other work of the active life consists entirely in outward occupation, for instance, almsgiving, receiving guests, and the like, which are less excellent than the works of contemplation, except in cases of necessity...Accordingly, the highest place in religious orders is held by those which are directed to teaching and preaching, which, moreover, are nearest to the episcopal perfection". (Summa Theologiae, IIa-IIe, q.188, art.6)

A good way to practice contemplative prayer is to first quiet yourself and serene your soul. Then gaze at a picture of Jesus, perhaps the Sacred Heart, and behold His beauty and

mercy. The best way, though, is to gaze at the crucifix. Fix your eyes and heart on Jesus and behold His wounds and sufferings. Become "wrapped up" in His sacrifice and the intense love He has for you. Gaze lovingly at Him on the cross. It's just you and Him and nobody else. When you gaze at Jesus with love and humility, you can be sure He will gaze at you and transform your soul.

It is also important to note that there are two forms of contemplative prayer, "acquired" and "infused". Acquired contemplation is what we've been speaking about here. It originates from our efforts. Infused contemplation is a higher form and is given to the soul by God, usually after years of meditative and acquired contemplative prayer, and many purifications of the soul. We can only experience infused contemplation if God wills that for us. It is purely a gift. But we can, as we mentioned, dispose our soul to receiving this gift by consistently engaging in meditative prayer and acquired contemplative prayer; and, of course, living an obedient life and humble life according to the scriptures and the Holy Catholic Church. St. Catherine of Siena speaks of infused contemplative prayer this way:

"We have in us a natural light which the Creator has given us to distinguish good from evil. It is proper then that we should use this natural light... But to know God well and to know ourselves, it is necessary that this natural, but imperfect light, be joined to the supernatural, perfect light, which is infused into our souls with grace..."(Letters, 301)

Consistency and commitment to contemplative prayer are vital to its progress. Set aside some time each day to enter into this essential aspect of Dominican life.

## **LECTIO DIVINA: PRAYING THE SCRIPTURES**



Lectio divina is a form of prayer that has a long history in the Church, and is especially associated with the monastic and religious life. It is a way of prayerful reading, where our hearts and minds are open to God. The main text for lectio divina is the Bible.

### **HOW DO WE DO LECTIO DIVINA?**

Traditionally, lectio divina was seen simply as a very slow; deliberate reading of the Bible so that the words could be learned off by heart. The idea was that if a monk knew texts of the Scripture off by heart, he could take these words with him in his mind and heart wherever he went. Particular passages would also come into his mind in particular situations, and so the words would be his constant companion. Thus the words were an important part of the monk's relationship with God.

These days, people tend to think of 4 stages of lectio divina:

### **SO WHY SHOULD WE READ THE BIBLE?**

We believe that the Bible is much more than a book of nice stories. We believe that the Bible contains religious truths, truths about God. So these are not just stories, but a very important way in which God speaks to us. It is the word of God. But the word of God is not just some text on a page. The Letter to the Hebrews tells us:

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.  
Hebrews 4:12

What the passage is saying is that the word of God has the power to change us and speaks to us now, here, today.

Reading the Bible is an important part of our growth in the Christian life. Reading it in a prayerful way will change us. But if we want this to happen, we must learn some particular skills, ways of reading and listening. We need to be able to listen for the still, small voice of God. Through gentle listening we become aware of the presence of God in the Scriptures.

**LECTIO:** We read the text. But not as we would read a newspaper or normal book. We read slowly.

**MEDITATIO:** When we are reading a passage, slowly and attentively, we may find a part that is particularly attractive, some words or a word that grabs us. We should stop and think about it for while. We can repeat it a few times in our mind for a few minutes.

**ORATIO:** This is when we speak to God, responding to that part of the passage that has attracted us. In other words, we make our own response to God's invitation.

**CONTEMPLATIO:** I think the best way of describing this is that we just remain quiet and still for a few moments after having spoken to God in prayer.

### **SOME THOUGHTS:**

1. Remember that prayer is God's gift. We cannot just use methods and think that God will do things for us. God works in our lives through his grace. We are not in control. Lectio divina is simply



a way for helping us be attentive, and to create space and time in which God can speak to us through the Bible. Sometimes lectio divina may make us 'feel' good, but more often we won't notice any difference. Prayer is not just about feeling good, but about allowing God to transform us, and helping us to love him and others. God works on us in ways that we cannot know.

2. Always start by making the sign of the cross, then say a prayer asking the Holy Spirit to help you, and end with a prayer of thanksgiving.

## HOW DO WE CHOOSE SUITABLE PASSAGES FOR LECTIO DIVINA?

One of the potential problems of lectio divina comes with selecting suitable Biblical texts. At one level, there is nothing wrong with using our favorite passages of the Bible, using lectio divina as a way of exploring their riches, and allowing God to speak to us through them. But we must be careful that we don't just stick to those passages that we like or choose ourselves. This is because we can get into the situation where we start to choose what we want God to be saying to us – a 'pick your own' approach. We need to find a way of choosing texts that is less subjective.

As Catholics, we believe that the Bible is God's gift to the Church, to a believing community. The fact that we are part of that community and not just an individual alone with God is important. Our interpretation of the Bible must be carried out within the Church. One of the best ways of choosing the texts for lectio divina is to use the texts that the Church gives us in the lectionary. We may want to make it part of our daily prayer to spend time in lectio divina with the Gospel of the day. Or we may even prefer to take the readings for the following Sunday, and go back to them several times. Either way, this means we are open to allowing the text that is given to speak to us, to give us a message that comforts, stirs, disturbs us.

## WHAT RESOURCES ARE AVAILABLE TO HELP WITH LECTIO DIVINA?

Scripture can be used from the readings of the day.

There are also many books available, and two in particular are really worth reading:

- David Foster OSB. Reading with God: Lectio Divina. Published: Continuum, 2005. – This is a superb book by a Monk of Downside Abbey in England. It is well written and clear, but not overly complicated.
- Mariano Magrassi OSB. Praying the Bible: introduction to Lectio Divina. Published: Liturgical Press, 1998. – This is a little 'heavier' than Foster's book, but is a fine book by the late Archbishop of Bari, Italy

## SOME TIPS:

- There are many websites about lectio divina, but few that give well written, in depth accounts. Be discerning! It can easily get to the point with prayer that we spend far more time reading about it than doing it. Once we know the basics, we just have to try, and persevere.
- For some people it might help to be guided by one who has some experience of lectio divina. Such a person may also be able to provide help by suggesting particular passages that might help reflect on particular questions or problems that life poses.

If you are unsure where to start, and don't want to launch into the cycle of daily readings, any one of the following passages might help:

- Genesis 2:4-9
- Matthew 15:32-39
- Isaiah 55:6-9
- Matthew 7:7-11
- John 4:7-16

## ***THE PRACTICE OF LECTIO DIVINA***

### **Tradition of Lectio Divina**

#### **Statement of Goals:**

An introduction to the tradition of lectio divina which formed the basis of St. Dominic's spiritual formation as a canon at Osma and which became part of the spirituality of the Order. Also, to explain lectio divina in such a way that the ordinary lay Dominican might see in it a technique of reading and praying the scriptures daily in a way compatible with any walk of life in the modern world.

#### **Presentation:**

Lectio Divina is a Latin phrase which in its literal translation means Sacred Reading. The word sacred means, in this context, primarily the sacred scriptures, but can also apply to the writings of the Fathers of the Church and some would even extend it to the writings of other more contemporary theologians and spiritual writers. In its classical usage, sacred means scripture and the writings of the Fathers.

The word reading in this context must be understood in the sense of the word in the ancient and early medieval world, i.e., a text which was read aloud and heard. The two senses involved were that of speech and hearing. This is important to understand because in the more modern sense the word reading refers to silent activity which is carried on with the eyes looking at a page of text. In the more ancient sense, reading was verbal and was heard with the ears. One could, therefore, either be looking at a page of text or speaking it from memory.

Taken together the words sacred reading in the tradition of Christian spirituality refer to the prayerful, meditative reading of the sacred text. It is a simple concept really. One must be quiet and have the scriptures before one. After quieting oneself down exteriorly and interiorly, one simply begins to read the sacred text. When something strikes you, one simply lingers over that line or phrase or word and repeats it over and over again, ideally committing it to memory. When one becomes distracted with some other thoughts, simply by returning to the sacred text prayer moves on again until something strikes us and we linger and pause again over it. The image used by some

ancient authors to explain lectio divina is that of the normal process of eating food. Just as you take a bite of your food and chew it so that it will come apart and make it possible for you to swallow it and thereby be nourished by it, so with the word of God: You must chew it so that you can swallow it and be sustained by it. As you chew, your mind thinks about it, ruminates on the text, not in any formal intellectual way, but simply by being open to the meaning of the text and being open to what God may wish to say to you in this particular word at this particular moment.

When one "does" lectio divina for 20 or 30 minutes (the early monks and nuns spent several hours each day "doing" lectio) and one goes about the ordinary demands of daily life, the conviction and hope of the one so praying is that these sacred words will come back to one from time to time and become the basis for a life of greater remembrance of God through the ordinary working day.

It was this idea of prayer which was the basis of St. Dominic's training and which he communicated to his followers and which the laity learned at the instruction of the brethren in the early days of the order. The nuns too were thoroughly trained in this practice of prayer. Other forms of prayer: the divine office, devotions, mental prayer, were all related to lectio, in that concentration on the Word of God in the sacred text was the crucial element for all forms of Dominican prayer, for Dominicans have been from the beginning, a people of the Word. Lectio Divina is simply one form of praying that word.

#### **Reading List**

##### **Sacred Scripture**

John 8 - 21

1 John

2 John

3 John

Revelations 1 - 4

Catechism of the Catholic Church  
Paragraphs 2346 - 2622

## Questions

Write a one page summary of these readings. Plan to attend the final or first vows of the Dominican Sisters at the Cathedral of the Incarnation. Look for dates and times on the calendar on our website.

Summaries may be emailed to [stdominic@bellsouth.net](mailto:stdominic@bellsouth.net) or sent by snail mail to 603 Ellen Drive, Goodlettsville, TN 37072.