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Lectio Divina, Framework of Teresian Prayer

by Fr. Sam Anthony Morello, Discalced Carmelite

To begin this section on a personal note, until I discovered lectio divina, my daily practice of prayer took twice as much effort. Now, for many years, I look forward to the time for prayer, and experience not only a greater facility in praying but much greater liberty of spirit. I hope others will experience the same coming home in this time-tested prayer of the monastic ages!

We should not be put off by the mention of monastic prayer. The monks prayed as simple Christians with the good sense to base their prayer on the sacred Scriptures. What they had that we lack is an ideal environment, the great monastic setting of classical times. But some of us suspect that monastic prayer created the setting before the setting sustained the prayer! You will see how easy the practice is and how the busy meditator of our age can settle down in a short time and enter into the interior castle of deep recollection. We don't always need a quiet place; we need the resolve to be still! It takes a little discipline.

It is not our purpose to discuss the tragic demise of monastic prayer in the West. The fact is that elements of monastic prayer survived, but the basic method was nearly lost even in monastic circles.(6) Teresa was heir to a monastic tradition, but the spirituality of the times was rather thin and a long chain of events over two centuries left the monastic practice of prayer infirm, to say the least. Happily, modern studies in spirituality have revealed again the simplicity and inner unity of monastic prayer. The Teresian spirit feeds and is fed by this rediscovered tradition.

The Elements of Lectio. Lectio divina means literally the divine reading. It is a monastic designation for the meditative reading of the Scriptures. Its elements are ingredients of a spiritual frame of mind, a holy discipline that intuitively and affectively dwells on a biblical text as a means of seeking communion with Christ. The practice could also be described as dwelling on a scriptural text in the divine presence for the sake of radical change in Christ. Yet again, we could say that lectio is making one's own a small selection, phrase, or word of the Bible, in pursuit of greater faith, hope, and charity. In any event, lectio divina is prayer over the Scriptures. The monastics of the early and medieval church developed this into a fine art. The elements are four: 1) lectio itself, which means reading, understood as the careful repetitious recitation of a short text of Scripture; 2) meditatio or meditation, an effort to fathom the meaning of the text and make it personally relevant to oneself in Christ; 3) oratio, which means prayer, taken as a personal response to the text, asking for the grace of the text or moving over it toward union with God; and 4) contemplatio, translated contemplation, gazing at length on something. The idea behind this final element is that sometimes, by the infused grace of God, one is raised above meditation to a state of seeing or experiencing the text as mystery and reality; one comes into experiential contact with the One behind and beyond the text. It is an exposure to the divine presence, to God's truth and benevolence.

A classic exposition of these four elements can be found in *The Ladder of Monks*, a twelfth century monastic letter by Guigo II on the contemplative life, where lectio, meditatio, oratio, and contemplatio are presented as four rungs leading from earth to heaven.(7) With this work as a general guide, let us consider each element in turn.

Reading. Reading in the monastic tradition involved placing the divine word on the lips. It was a focusing and centering device. One would gently read a selection from the Bible, and when a thought, line, or word stood out and captured the reader's attention, he or she would stop there and dwell on that text, carefully repeating it over and over. At each distraction one would simply return to this repetition. He or she would stay with that same text until it dried up, and would then move on with the reading until finding another engaging text. Classically, the monk would do this repetitious reading out loud, proclaiming the word to his or her own senses, praying with the whole body. This first element is very simple, nothing more than verbal focus on a biblical thought, like placing the word as food in the mouth. In this way monks committed to memory the word of God bit by bit.

Meditation. Once the word of God is on the lips and in the mouth, one begins to bite and chew it; one begins to meditate on it. To meditate means to ruminate, to chew the word, dwelling at leisure on a morsel to extract the meaning of the text. Every word of Scripture was seen as intended for oneself. Every text spoke of Christ and of the pray-er. The monk personalized the text, entering into the meaning and identifying with it.

This is the second element of lectio divina. Meditation employs in an intuitive way all the faculties. One does not work hard at this prayer, but simply keeps listening to the words being repeated, letting them suggest their own images, reflections, intuitive thoughts. The whole process is basically intuitive, a right-brain activity (as is said today), like reading a love letter over and over again. Every word is savored and every thought made one's own. (Lovers even memorize their favorite passages!) The meditator ponders and perceives the hidden lessons in the word of God in such a way that wisdom for life is learned. Meditation seeks to acquire the mind of Christ. One slowly begins to see what the scriptures are saying. The meditator begins the lifetime task of hearing the word of God so as to keep it. Meditation is basically hearing the word that lectio (reading) is repeating.

Prayer. With the help of grace, devout thought engenders prayer, the third element of lectio divina. The word of God moves from the lips to the mind, and now into the heart. Oratio or prayer is the response of the heart to the word of God we have heard addressing us through the Scriptures. Basically, prayer in this sense desires the grace of the text so ardently that it demands the needed graces of God. (Guigo II speaks of imperium, a command issued to God from our dire poverty that desperately depends on the salvation only God can give.) Prayer here is the whole affective component of meditation. It is petition, it is affective conversation with sentiments of love, it is resolution to grow in the virtues of Christ, it is compunction of heart for one's sins, it is silent company-keeping, it is the loving gaze. Like the other elements of lectio, the affective dimension grows and develops. It moves toward simplicity and on into an acquired contemplation. Prayer desires God.

Contemplation. The fourth element is contemplation. Here God slakes the soul's thirst and feeds its hunger, according to Guigo II. God gives the meditator a new wine and lifts him or her above the normal meditative self into the sphere of experienced transcendence. Here at last is an infused element of prayer. Here the Spirit prays in the human spirit. One experiences a state of inner harmony; carnal motions are quieted; the flesh is not at odds with the spirit; the person is in a state of spiritual integration. The light of God's presence shines through the soul experientially. The love of God is no longer abstract, but concretely poured into the receiving self. One can see oneself being loved and loving in return. Clearly, we are speaking of pure gift at this point. These moments can be fleeting or prolonged, subtle or pronounced. They can go and come again. They can mingle with the flow of meditative words repeated, thoughts reflected, intuitions enjoyed, resolutions enacted. But the person is more still and passive; our God is passing by.

We might sum up what Guigo II says of the four elements of lectio divina in the following ways: reading seeks; meditation finds (meaning); prayer demands; contemplation tastes (God). Or again: reading provides solid food; meditation masticates; prayer achieves a savor; contemplation is the sweetness that refreshes. Or yet again: reading is on the surface; meditation gets to the inner substance; prayer demands by desire; contemplation experiences by delight.

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