

Lectio Divina
Listening to God in the Prayerful Reading of the Sacred Scriptures
by Most Rev. David L. Toups, STD

Pope Benedict XVI would regularly mention the practice of *Lectio Divina* in his catechesis as one of the sources for the renewal of Christianity in the world today. During the Pauline Year, there was a gathering of Bishops in Rome for a special Synod on the Word. The word *Lectio Divina* was mentioned 28 times in the *Instrumentum Laboris* (the preparatory document) of the Synod and was brought up regularly in the interventions of the synodal participants. The *Instrumentum Laboris* states: “An authentic spirituality of the Word demands that prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that God and man may walk together; for we speak to him when we pray; we hear him when we read the divine sayings” (n. 41).

Listening to God in the prayerful reading of the Sacred Scriptures occurs in two basic forms: *Lectio Divina* and Ignatian Contemplation (according to the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius of Loyola). *Lectio* is the practice of pondering a line from a particular scriptural passage and “chewing on it,” while the Ignatian method invites one to enter personally into a biblical scene through the gift of the intellect and imagination. Both of these forms of scriptural prayer are interrelated and are very effective in connecting with Jesus in a personal way through listening to the Holy Spirit’s inspiration. All prayer is a gift and is thus the result of grace – when something profound comes to us in prayer, we accept it as a gift, and when nothing happens we are still with the Lord Jesus in a prayerful posture and we again receive the simplicity of the prayer as a gift.

There are a few things we can do to more properly dispose ourselves to the Word:

- Choose the Scripture over which you are about to pray ahead of time.
- Decide how much time you are able to spend with this particular scripture (20-30 minutes), and don’t quit early once you have decided upon a time – leave room for God to work right up to the last minute. It is a genuine temptation to leave early.
- Find a comfortable chair and posture. It is always a blessing to be able to pray in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. Access to a chapel would be optimal, but if that is not possible, set aside a prayer corner with an icon or a crucifix to keep you from distraction.
- Begin the time of prayer with a simple dialogue with each of the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity, thus acknowledging with Whom you are engaging in prayer. Invite Mary and your patron saint also to journey with you and intercede for you to grow closer to Christ. This is what St. Ignatius calls the colloquy.
- Read over the scripture that you have chosen a few times and then simply sit with the Word.
- Relax and breathe – getting uptight can be a major obstacle. Again, prayer is a gift, allow yourself to be led by the Holy Spirit; it is not you “doing it” but God allowing it to unfold

within you. Allow the Scripture to manifest itself; you do not have to try too hard or contrive anything.

- As you entered into the reflection of the scriptural passage “Did it seem as if the Holy Spirit was giving you an insight, or giving you consolation or encouragement? Did a new awareness of the meaning of the gospel teaching dawn on you? Was the time just quiet or was it stormy? [...] Because the goal of [each time of prayer] is a stronger personal relationship with God, a two-way communication is implied. Be open to receiving insight and guidance through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within you.”¹
- Be surprised by the Lord, it is He Who is the author of the intellect and imagination, allow Him to use yours. Do not be afraid of this type of prayer, you will be amazed at what God will reveal to you. Make a conscious move to operate out of the heart and not the head. This does not mean that you are suspending reason; you are simply getting out of the way to allow the Holy Spirit to be the driver and not yourself. You may want to pray the prayer of St. Ignatius below to help you allow God to be in control.
- ARRR: Acknowledge, Relate, Receive, and Respond. *Acknowledge* what stirs in your heart as you read the Scripture and *relate*/talk to Christ about it. Once you have shared with the Lord, *receive* what He wants to give you – receive a word, phrase, image, feeling of comfort or peace, etc. Finally *respond* to what is happening within you: more conversation with God, a resolution, the strength to move forward, etc.²
- “As we prayerfully and submissively bring ourselves into the Lord’s presence through a Scripture passage, the Spirit will bring thoughts, ideas, images, symbols, insights and impressions to our mind which will convey the application of God’s Word in Scripture to our own personal reality. We learn to recognize this form of communication by practice and experience with prayer.”³
- Close with a similar colloquy as at the beginning of prayer and ask: “Lord Jesus, what is the word that you want to give me?” Listen quietly as you close your prayer and an echo of the scripture you just prayed over may come to you, or another word of peace and comfort.
- Write down the words you feel the Lord has given you in prayer, as well as the thoughts, feelings, and desires you may be experiencing. What is Jesus trying to say to you today with the reflection that you just had?
- It is beneficial to share your prayer experiences with someone well versed in the spiritual life. This may be done in a small group setting or with a spiritual director.
- Scriptural prayer is very enriching and allows the Word of God to become ever more something that vivifies your life. The time and effort that you put into spiritual exercise will result in a deeper, more intimate union with the Savior of the world. God’s gift of prayer is exponentially more rewarding than anything we put into it.

Take, O Lord, and receive
my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will.
All that I am and all that I possess You have given me:
I surrender it all to You to be disposed of according to Your will.
Give me only Your love and Your grace;
with these I will be rich enough,
and will desire nothing more. Amen.

Ordained to the priesthood for the Diocese of Saint Petersburg in 1997, David Toups received his Doctoral Degree in Dogmatic Theology from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas in 2004. For the next two years, he served in various capacities at St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary, returning there for eight years in 2012 as Rector. From 2007 to 2010 he served as the Associate Director of the Secretariat of Clergy, Consecrated Life and Vocations at the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, during which he shared this article with us. Pope Francis appointed Toups as bishop of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Beaumont, Texas in the summer of 2020.

¹ Carol Marquardt, *Foundations of Personal Prayer: Listening and Loving in God's Embrace* (Mantle Publishing: Clearwater, Florida, 2008), 11 (<https://ourfiat.com>).

² As articulated by the *Institute for Priestly Formation* at Creighton University (<https://priestlyformation.org/>).

³ Marquardt, 14.