

There are many forms of prayer that employ Sacred Scripture, God's word, but the oldest, simplest, and most versatile is one which dates from the earliest days of monasticism, lectio divina. "Lectio divina" is Latin for "prayerful reading." It is a form of prayer by which we draw God's word progressively deeper into ourselves so that we may be drawn into a progressively deeper and more intimate relationship with God. It is a four-stage process of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Allow me to explain.

Reading: What does the passage say?

Choose a short scripture passage and read it several times to get a sense of what it says. Then reread it slowly and carefully, being attentive to any word or phrase that sparks something in you. Your goal is to "listen," as it were, with the "ear of the heart." On finding that word or phrase that sparks something in you, you have found where you wish to begin your prayer.

Meditation: What does the passage say to me?

Now prayerfully ponder your chosen word or phrase, allowing it to interact with your thoughts, hopes, memories, and desires – allowing God's word to become God's word for you, a word that touches your heart and opens it to God. But in this it is important to limit your thinking. Your goal is not thoughts or insights, but rather the affections and desires they begin to spark in you.

Prayer: What is my prayerful response to God?

Your prayerful response to God is both a loving conversation with God who calls you into His embrace of all that you have come to feel and understand and an offering of all your hopes and dreams and fears and concerns.

Contemplation: Remain in silence

Now put aside the words and thoughts with which you began your prayer and simply rest in God's embrace, basking in the desires and affections your prayer has sparked in you, savoring and relishing them. No longer is it God's word which draws you, but God. God invites you: "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Ignatius Loyola observes that "it is not abundance of knowledge that fills and satisfies the soul, but rather the inner sense and taste of things."

When you feel that you have exhausted the thought that sparked the affections and desires, return to your chosen word or phrase in search of a new thought. When you feel that you have exhausted the word or phrase, return to the passage in search of a new word or phrase.

Summary:

The Benedictine abbot and spiritual writer, Dom Columba Marmion (1858-1923), offers the following summary of *lectio divina*:

We read	(<i>reading</i>)
under the eye of God	(<i>meditation</i>)
until the heart is touched	(<i>prayer</i>)
and leaps to flame.	(<i>contemplation</i>)

Putting the Pieces Together:

In practice, lectio divina is not always the orderly step-by-step process it may seem to be. As you grow in your relationship with God, your prayer will become simpler and more affective, and you will more and more be led by the Spirit. Thus, after experiencing a strong affection in the 'meditation' stage you may choose to jump immediately to the 'contemplation' stage in order to savor the affection, and then continue in your prayer by alternating between the 'meditation' and 'contemplation' stages indefinitely.

Some Suggestions:

Allow me to offer some suggestions on to prayerfully approach some Scripture passages:

1. “O God, you are my God: I long for you; my body yearns for you; my soul thirsts for you as in a land parched, lifeless, and without water. So, I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. For your steadfast love is better than life; my lips will praise you.” (Psalm 63:1-3)
 - a. Notice that you are the speaker. The sentiments expressed are your sentiments. This sets the stage on how you should approach your prayer.
 - b. Notice that the sentiments expressed are those of a person deeply in love with God, a person for whom God was the center of his/her life. Once again, the sentiments the writer expressed are your sentiments
 - c. Notice that the first verse – “O God, you are my God: I long for you; my body yearns for you; my soul thirsts for you like a land parched, lifeless, and without water” – is magnificent. Even if this were not the first verse, you would want to begin your prayer there.
 - d. Suggestion: This verse has such richness, I suggest that you take no more than a single thought at any one time for your prayer: e.g., (1) “O God,” (2) “you are my God,” (3) “I long for you,” (4) my body yearns for you, (5) “my soul thirsts for you,” (6) “like a land parched, lifeless, and without water.”
2. “But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, Jacob, and formed you, Israel: Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name: you are mine. When you pass through waters, I will be with you; through rivers, you shall not be swept away. When you walk through fire, you shall not be burned, nor will flames consume you. For I, the Lord, am your God, the Holy One of Israel, your savior.” (Isaiah 43:1-3a)
 - a. Notice that God is the speaker. The sentiments expressed are God’s sentiments. This sets the stage on how you should approach your prayer.
 - b. Notice that the introductory words – “But now, thus says the Lord, who created you, Jacob, and formed you, Israel” – are unimportant for your prayer and can be ignored. Your prayer can thus begin with the words, “Do not fear.”
 - c. Suggestion: Approach your prayer as if God were speaking to you.