

There are many forms of prayer that employ Sacred Scripture – God’s word – but the oldest, simplest, and most versatile is one whose origins reside in early monasticism: “lectio divina,” which is Latin for “prayerful reading”. It is a form of prayer by which we draw God’s word progressively deeper within ourselves so that we might be drawn into a progressively deeper and more intimate relationship with God. *Lectio divina* is a four-stage process of reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. It should be allowed to unfold slowly. Allow me to explain.

Reading: *Lectio* (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. You want to “listen” with the “ear of the heart.” On finding that word or phrase, you have found where you wish to begin your prayer.

Meditation: *Meditatio* (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 limit your thinking. Your goal is not thoughts or insights, but rather the affections and desires they begin to spark in you.

Prayer: *Oratio* (What is my prayerful response to God?)

Now speak to God in words or silent affection of what you have come to feel and understand, expressing your hopes, dreams, fears, and concerns. Allow the Holy Spirit to lead you.

Contemplation: *Contemplatio* (Remain in silence)

Now put aside the words and thoughts with which you began your prayer, and simply bask in the desires and affections they have sparked in you, savoring them, and relishing them. It is at this stage that prayer really occurs. It is no longer the scripture passage which draws you, but God. God invites you: “Be still and know that I am God” (Psalm 46:10). Ignatius Loyola tells us 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 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>lectio</i>)
under the eye of God	(<i>meditatio</i>)
until the heart is touched	(<i>oratio</i>)
and leaps to flame.	(<i>contemplatio</i>)

Putting the Pieces Together: In practice, *lectio divina* is not the orderly step-by-step process it might seem to be. In fact, it often unfolds in a much more free-flowing manner. By way of example, a person experiencing a strong affection in the ‘meditation’ stage might choose to bypass the ‘prayer’ stage and jump immediately to the ‘contemplation’ stage in order to savor the affection, and then continue in her prayer by alternating between the ‘meditation’ and ‘contemplation’ stages almost indefinitely, with each meditation sparking a thought, which in turn sparks an affection, which is savored in the ‘contemplation’ stage, while the ‘prayer’ stage continues to be bypassed and the ‘reading’ stage ignored.

Lectio Divina: A Guided Example:

So that you better might appreciate how *lectio divina* is actually done, allow me to guide you through an example of the prayer by using the first three verses of Psalm 63 as the subject of our prayer. First, read the entire passage to get a sense of what it is saying.

“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)

Your initial reading of the passage reveals that it was written by a person very much in love with God, a person for whom God was the center of his/her life. This understanding sets the tone of how you should approach it. Then, slowly and carefully reread the passage several times, being particularly attentive to any word or phrase that sparks something in you. You may thus realize 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” – entirely captures your attention. Even if this were not the first verse, you would wish to begin your prayer there.

After reading the entire passage, reread what seems to be the first unit of the passage – “O God” – and ponder what it means to you. You realize that you in the presence of God..., the eternal God..., the majestic God..., the awesome God..., the infinitely powerful God..., the infinitely compassionate God... Yet this God is the loving God, ... the God who is love itself... the God who is before you..., and surrounds you..., and is deeply within you..., is more intimate to you than your innermost self. Now speak to God, in words or silent affection of all that you sense within yourself: “O God, I am overwhelmed by your majesty, your power, but most especially by your love. But I am even more overwhelmed in realizing that you are here... with me.” Finally, put aside words and thoughts and simply rest in the heart of this eternal, majestic, awesome, infinitely powerful, and loving God.

Notice how the prayer unfolds very slowly and that thoughts give rise to affections which, in turn, draw you more and more into the desire to simply rest in God’s presence.

Now proceed to the next unit of the passage – “you are my God” – and ponder what it means to you. In doing so, you immediately realize that not only is God *your* God, but that you are God’s son or daughter and are thus very dear to God. You are God’s beloved. Try though you might, you sense no desire to pursue further thoughts, nor, for that matter, do you even wish to speak. You wish only to rest in God’s embrace and thus do so.

Notice that *lectio divina* is not a rigid form of prayer. Rather, it is responsive to how the person is being moved interiorly, always moving the person more and more into contemplation.

Now proceed to the next unit of the passage – “I long for you; my heart yearns for you; my soul thirsts for you.” The words express the writer’s deepest desire. They express *your* deepest desire. The words of the psalm have become *your* words – “I long for you...; my heart yearns for you...; my soul thirsts for you...; as in a land parched, lifeless, and without water.” You sense no need to ponder anything. You wish simply to rest in God.

Notice how *lectio divina* unfolds very slowly and how the thoughts spark affections which, in turn, draw you ever more deeply into God’s love. Ultimately, *lectio divina* moves a person toward contemplation.