



## RESOURCES IN SPIRITUAL FORMATION

Dedicated to Research and Reflection in Formative Spirituality

### LENTEN PRACTICE: LECTIO DIVINA

March 1, 2010

As discussed in last week's reflection, the Lenten call to conversion is a call not only to turn away from but to turn toward. St. Paul, in the letter to the Romans, speaks of this as the living of a new life, born of a new consciousness.

Do not model yourselves on the behavior of the world around you, but let your behavior change, modeled by your new mind. This is the only way to discover the will of God and know what is good, what it is that God wants, and what is the perfect thing to do. (Romans 12: 2)

This renewal of mind comes from our growing identification with the mind of Jesus Christ (Philippians 2:5). In this light, we repent of the degree to which we have lost our true mind, to the degree that we have come to live from a false mind or consciousness that has become dissociated from our spiritual identity. In this way, the practices of Lent are aimed at our remembering who we most deeply are and to whom we most deeply belong. Through the practices of Lent we seek to recover our identification with the mind of Christ.

One such practice is what our spiritual tradition terms *lectio divina*, that is, divine reading. It is a way of opening ourselves to and personally dialoguing with the Sacred Words of the Scripture and of other great texts from the spiritual tradition. It is a way of reading that can become a "narrow gate" to meditation, prayer and identification with the One who is our Divine Source. But for us believers of the twenty-first century, it can seem a very narrow gate indeed.

To read a sacred text in such a way that it may truly mediate to us the Presence that it offers does not come readily to us. Never before in history have human beings been exposed to so many words, to so much information. Those of us beyond a certain age can still remember a time from our youth in which our (and certainly our parents' or grandparents') consciousness was bounded by the life and events of our own lives and those of our immediate family and community. It was not that there was no awareness of the larger world, but that awareness was always mediated through our direct experience and immediate relationships. But in our life today, via the mass media and the internet, most of us have heard more information by 9:00 am than our grandparents would have been exposed to in months. The result of this "information explosion" is that our relationship to the individual word has changed. It has, inevitably, become less attentive and less inwardly dialogical. That is, we are unaccustomed to really listening to and chewing over the individual words (or even thoughts) that we hear and attending to our unique response and reaction to them. Yet this is precisely the relationship to which Sacred Words summon us. These words call us into an encounter with that which is beyond our ordinary understanding, that which is the wholly and loving Other.



The Christian spiritual tradition calls this process of dialogical encounter with the Sacred Word *lectio divina* or divine reading. It identifies the four phases of this process as reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. Let us exemplify the practice of these phases with a line from Psalm 24. "The Lord's are the earth and its fullness; the world and those who dwell in it."

To begin our **reading** we find ourselves a quiet, solitary place, relaxing so that we are comfortable but fully awake. We take a moment to call to mind the Lord's loving presence within. We read slowly, word by word, not skimming across the page and gulping the sentence whole, but rather hearing each word deeply within our hearts.

We then find ourselves reflecting on the words (**meditation**). What does it mean to say that "the earth and its fullness" are "the Lord's"? In part, it means that we are not masters but rather servants of Reality. It requires that our basic disposition toward life and others be converted from control and domination to reverence and respect. And, it summons us to recognize that to be human, in the deepest sense, is to know responsibility to Another for our life and our world. In terms of one's personal formation, this Sacred Word calls on me, first, to identify and relinquish my demands that the persons and situations which I encounter today submit to my projects and designs. It calls me to live this day in a mode of attentive and humble self-presence that attunes to all those conscious and unconscious ways in which my thoughts, words, and actions spring out of the habits and compulsions born of my personal preferences. Secondly, it summons me to a different way of being: a mode of respectful, caring, and gentle presence to the persons, situations, and events of my day. I am called to see all I encounter not as an extension of my own desires and taken-for-granted assumptions, but rather as a marvelous and mysterious encounter with the Holy Other who seeks my loving and humble participation.

As my reflection on the opening line of the Psalm deepens, I may then find myself drawn to speaking with the Lord (**prayer**), asking for the Presence and grace to remain awake to God's manifestations in each moment of the coming day. I might ask that I may move slowly and gently throughout the day, at a pace and in a disposition that allows me to stay within myself, allowing me to remain mindful of how I am thinking, speaking, and acting. May I, throughout the day, be a disciple, a humble learner from life, rather than fall into the arrogance of a taken-for-granted repetitiveness. And finally, perhaps, I might be drawn to ask for the grace to do what I can simply and trustingly at each moment to be a servant of God's call as it comes to me in every person, situation, and task.

Then, perhaps, if it is God's will for me this day, I may be drawn to a place beyond my reading, meditation, or prayer to the gift of a silent, gentle Presence (**Contemplation**). Here I am given a gift beyond any effort of my own. All I am asked to do is to remain still and to appreciate the recognition that I too am a part of the "earth and its fullness" that is the Lord's.

This practice of *lectio divina* can be done with any passage from scripture or from the great tradition of spiritual literature. For many, a good way of practice is with the scriptures chosen for the daily and Sunday liturgies. Whatever is chosen, it is important to read very slowly and meditatively, pausing to meditate and pray wherever we are drawn. The key is to remember that we are reading not for *information* but for *formation*.

At the end of his life on earth, the Lord Jesus made a promise to us: "I will not leave you orphaned. I will come back to you." (John 14, 18) The Lord is always true to his word. One of the ways in which he remains always with us is his sacred word. If we but turn and return to that Word with humble, stilled, and open hearts, we can remember that he is always with us and within us, beckoning us, at each moment and in every situation, to the "life to the full" which is our true identity and destiny.