

Prayer readings – Lectio Divina

"Prayer doesn't have to be just one way," says author/educator Sylvia Maddox of Church of Reconciliation, San Antonio. "There's a whole treasure chest of ways to pray. When one isn't working, use another one." One of her favorites is lectio divina, though she acknowledges that "some people are afraid of it." The practice is commonly described with Latin terminology: scary. And it's based on the unmediated reading of biblical passages: to some, that's scarier still.

It's the task of those who teach lectio divina (literally, "sacred reading") to demystify this ancient but newly-popular practice of meditative Bible reading. In fact, no knowledge of Latin is required, nor is a learned familiarity with Scripture. All that is needed, says Maddox, is "an assurance that God's Word and plan is revealed through scripture."

Perhaps it's the excitement of direct connection that has brought lectio divina forward from its origins in the early church, through its association with the Benedictine Rule, to the present renewal of interest in spirituality. Or maybe it's the simplicity and orderliness of the practice itself, as it most often is approached.

The method begins with lectio, usually a slow, repetitive reading of the scriptural passage. Then comes meditation, or reflection on the Word. At this point, "You wait until a word or phrase stands out from the reading and seems to be spoken to you," says Maddox. "You say it over and over and see how it relates to your life at that time."

Next is oratio or response. "Until this point, you aren't giving anything back to God," she says. "This is where the dialog starts." Some people initiate it with praise, petitions or intercession "or a mixture of all of them, depending on where you are in your life and where you are with the Scripture."

Traditionally, the last step is contemplation a quiet period of rest in the Word that may lead to "a realization of the relationship with God that has come through the prayer," says Maddox. Some add a fifth step, action, for applying the lessons of lectio divina in daily life. As she sees it, lectio divina can be summed up in a few keywords: listening, receiving, responding and resting.

Progressing through them can take as little as half an hour, says Henry Travers of St. Paul's, San Antonio, who was introduced to lectio divina several years ago by Maddox and local clergy. "It rather quickly took root, probably because it felt very consistent with my earlier training in yoga and Zen meditation." For Travers, the practice consists of a brief period of "slowly reading twice and savoring a passage of Scripture, eventually resting with a focal, striking word or phrase which is quietly turned over and over in the mind, as one listens for and to the 'still, small voice within'." Through this process, he says, "The Holy Spirit reveals a message of personal import to the heart."

This reading of Scripture is not going against scholarship, it's reading with different eyes and ears.

It may be equally hard for some fundamentalist Christians to get used to reading biblical texts as something other than a well-known rule book, says Maddox, who was reared in the Baptist tradition. In *lectio divina*, she says, "You're not tearing (the passages) apart intellectually and you're not pounding your fist on the Bible. This is about listening to the Word of God and then being transformed by what the Scriptures give you: a vision of God that becomes implanted in you."

"The purpose of prayer isn't inner peace, it's the transformation of life," adds Maddox.
– Paula Allen