

Lectio Divina, adapted from Marjorie Thompson's book, *Soul Feast*

There are four basic phases in the classic practice of spiritual reading, termed in Latin *lectio*, *meditation*, *oratio*, and *contemplation*. For a basic English equivalent, add the letter *n* to each. Here, in brief, is a description of each movement.

Lectio literally means reading. It signifies this kind of reading: reflective, gentle paced, one-bite-at-a-time. It means reading as if you had a love letter in hand. You allow the words that are pregnant and weighty with meaning to sink in and expand and nourish your heart. With scripture, it entails reading each sentence as if for the first time, expecting that God will address you with a direct and personal message. The message may not be comfortable. Sometimes letters from those who love us contain painful words, but they are offered out of love and may be just what we need to hear. The question behind our reading is, "God, what are you saying to me just now?"

Meditatio naturally translates as meditation. The meaning of meditation in historic Jewish and Christian meditation involves an active mind. The type of mental work is quite specific. It is not bible study. The mind work of meditation moves us to reflection on where we are in the text. Active imagination can sometimes help us find connections between our life stories and the great story of God's redemptive work with us. Meditation engages us at the level of the "heart" in its biblical sense, where memory, experience, thoughts, feelings, hopes, desires, intuitions, and intentions are joined. This is where we are likely to discover

what a given passage means in our lives personally or as a community.

Oratio in an earlier era, referred to spoken prayer. In the context of *Lectio Divina*, it means the prayer that naturally flows out of our meditation. Here is our first response to what we have heard and assimilated in the first two phases of spiritual reading. *Oratio* is the direct cry of the heart to God that rises when we have heard ourselves personally addressed through the Word. Perhaps the Word has touched our pain, and we cry out in hurt, anger, or frustration; perhaps God has revealed our sin, and we whisper in confession and repentance; perhaps the Word has evoked gratitude, and our words leap up in thanksgiving; perhaps it has sparked our joy, and we sing out adoration and praise! *Oratio* allows a full range of human responses to tumble forth in heart-felt prayer to the One for whom we were made.

Contemplatio, of course, means contemplation. Contemplation is essentially rest, play, Sabbath-time in God's presence. Here there are no expectations, no demands, no need to know, no desire but to be in the divine presence, receptive to whatever God desires to do with us. Here we allow ourselves simply to be. Psalm 131:2 captures the essence of *contemplation*: "Enough for me to keep my soul tranquil like a child in its mother's arms, as content as a child that has been weaned." A weaned child is not seeking anything at its mother's breast; it is content to rest quietly, enjoying the simple comfort of the mother's loving presence, an image of complete peace.

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