

Lectio Divina: A Beginner's Guide

BY ELIZABETH MANNEH *Originally published January 18, 2017*

I've always wanted to be a "good" Christian. I've read stacks of books about God and the Christian life, but I only occasionally felt closer to Him. That all changed when I read Trappist Monk Fr. Thomas Keating's "Open Mind, Open Heart" and learned about the prayer practice of Lectio Divina.

Lectio Divina (literally *divine reading*) is a way of becoming immersed in the Scriptures very personally. It draws on the way Jews read the Haggadah, a text read during Passover that retells the Exodus story. Haggadah means "telling" and along with being a physical text, the word captures the practice of telling and retelling a story.

The Christian form of Lectio Divina was first introduced by St. Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330- 395), and also encouraged by St. Benedict of Nursia (c. 480-547), the founder of the Benedictine order. It's a way of developing a closer relationship with God by reflecting prayerfully on His words. In Lectio Divina, the chosen spiritual text is read four times in total, giving an opportunity to think deeply about it and respond thoughtfully. When we practice Lectio Divina, we can imagine we're actually involved in the events of Scripture — for example, hearing God's words to the Israelites in the desert. It's an intensely personal experience.

Fr. Keating describes the four stages of Lectio Divina as compass points around a circle, with the Holy Spirit moving seamlessly between them. As a beginner, I've found it helpful to follow the stages in order. Like learning an instrument, once I've learned the basics, I'll be able to improvise! Here's how to get started:

Prepare

I'd suggest 30 minutes to read, reflect, and respond to the Holy Spirit's promptings in Lectio Divina. To tune in, I like to light a candle, not because it's necessary, but because the flame and fragrance serve as gentle reminders when collecting my thoughts and calming my mind. I pray a prayer of invitation, saying something like, "God, let me hear from you," and spend a few moments sitting quietly so my mind is open to hearing from God.

Lectio (Read)

My first reading is an opportunity to get to know the Scripture passage. I listen carefully for any words or phrases that seem to jump out. It's important not to force things, but wait patiently for God to give gentle guidance. One day when reading Jeremiah 31, I felt my mind drawn to the strength of God's commitment to His covenant:

"[I will make a new covenant] not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my

covenant that they broke, though I was their husband.” (Jeremiah 31:32 English Standard Version)

I was struck by the image of God leading His people by the hand as an act of love – they weren’t left to begin their momentous journey alone.

Meditatio (Reflect)

The second reading of the same passage focuses further on the points I become aware of during the first reading. Often I’ll just re-read a few verses so I can reflect carefully on where God has nudged me.

Then I’ll reflect on what I believe God is saying. I try not to analyze the passage. It’s easy to slip into “study mode” and think about interesting points rather than listening to what God might be saying. It helps to ask God to make His focus clear.

Oratio (Respond)

After a third reading, it’s time to respond. I like to record my thoughts by journaling because I know I’m very prone to forgetting what I’ve learned, even by the next day! We can respond in prayer too, which gives us the opportunity for a conversation with God.

When reading Jeremiah, I journaled my wonderings. If God is so powerfully committed to keeping His covenant with me, why do I sometimes lack the commitment to stay close to God? Often the events of the day crowd in, and I don’t always make time to listen to God. I prayed that God would help me to prioritize spending time with Him.

Contemplatio (Rest)

After the final reading, I spend around 10 minutes in silent contemplation. This isn’t a time of prayer or meditation — I just sit quietly and allow God to work. When my mind starts to wander and dart here and there, I bring it gently back to stillness again.

It’s important to remember that Lectio Divina is not an end in itself or another spiritual practice to tick off our to-do list. It helps us hear specifically and individually from God through Scripture, guided by the Holy Spirit, and deepens our relationship with Him.



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Elizabeth Manneh is a freelance writer, sharing her time between the UK and The Gambia, West Africa. She's written for many publications, including Huffington Post, ReadersDigest.com, and The Good Men Project. She's on a lifelong exploration to find ways of bringing God into all aspects of her everyday life.