

Spiritual Formation

with Lectio Divina

The Role of Spiritual Disciplines in Spiritual Formation

Spiritual formation is an important part of the Christian life. It is the life-long process of being conformed in the image of Christ which allows us to live a life like Jesus, full of fruitful relationships, authentic rest, satisfying service, meaningful struggle, and pure contentment. Without transformation in our life, we can feel stagnant and without purpose. But as we are formed in the image of Christ, we move toward full spiritual maturity, being able to fully enjoy God and all his creation. (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Spiritual disciplines are the avenues that allow us to learn from God about our relationship with Him, ourselves, and others. They are habits, practices, and experiences that promote spiritual maturity in all who desire to be formed into the image of Christ. When we allow the practice of spiritual disciplines to open our hearts and minds to God, the Holy Spirit does the work of transformation within us. From there, we begin responding to God in ways that show our trust and dependence on Him.

Every spiritual discipline tutors us in relationship.¹

Our relationship with God also grows with the consistent practice of spiritual disciplines. Thomas Green describes how our relationship with God deepens through spiritual practices using a marriage analogy. Couples typically advance their relationship in stages. A familiar progression we see is from courtship to honeymoon and then on to marriage. Each stage of the relationship produces a depth in knowledge and intimacy.

The courtship stage is for getting to know each other. The two learn about themselves while learning more about the person they are involved with. The two begin to ask what it means to spend the rest of their life with this person. Once the couple has learned enough, they may choose to move to the honeymoon stage. During the honeymoon, the two begin to experience love for each other that is satisfied by simply being in each other's presence. Finally, the marriage stage transforms the superficial love of the honeymoon into a more profound, self-sacrificing love for one another. In this

¹ Thompson, Marjorie J. *Soul Feast: An Invitation to the Christian Spiritual Life*. Newly Revised Edition. Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014: p. 11.

stage, the couple learns to serve and support each other. Like human relationships, our relationship with God goes through these same stages (see Figure 1).

RELATIONSHIP STAGE	CHARACTERISTICS	GOAL	SPIRITUAL PRACTICES
Courtship	Knowing God	Understanding what it means to spend my life with God.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meditative prayer • Imaginative prayer • Bible study
Honeymoon	Experiencing God	Learning to experience God's presence.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retreat • Lectio Divina • Contemplative prayer
Marriage	Transformed by God	Allowing yourself to be transformed into the image of Christ.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Examen • Confession/Repentance • Simplicity

Figure 1

Spiritual disciplines help us to deepen our relationship with God by providing experiences that put us in the presence of God for increased knowledge and love of God, self, and others. As we do so, not only do we grow in intimacy with God, but we are also continually shaped into the image of Christ, enabling us to live life to the fullest.

Lectio Divina is just one spiritual discipline that can help you grow your relationship with Christ while being formed in his image.

Lectio Divina

Definition

Lectio Divina – Latin for “divine reading” or “spiritual reading” – is the practice of the prayerfully reading Scripture in a way that allows the Lord to speak to you personally.

Intent

The intent behind Lectio Divina lies in the desire we bring to the practice – a thirst to sit in the presence of God, where we hear insight, wisdom, and guidance directly from the Lord. Lectio Divina provides a space for the Spirit to initiate a conversation through Scripture where we first listen and then respond. As we do so, we present ourselves to the Holy Spirit for the work of transformation.

Scripture References

“Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long” Psalm 119:97

“No, the word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.” Deuteronomy 30:14

“Keep this Book of Law always on your lips; mediate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.” Joshua 1:8

Historical Background

Lectio Divina has roots back to the earliest days of the Church. Early Jews not only analyzed Scripture objectively for its true meaning but also read Scripture for its personal significance in their spiritual journey. The more personal aspects of Scripture reading are the earliest roots of Lectio Divina. Lectio Divina encouraged reading Scripture for a unique, non-objective encounter with God. Though practiced since the begin of Christianity, the start of this practice is attributed to St. Benedict of the Western monastic tradition.

Reading is the monk's spiritual nourishment, to be taken for maintaining his spiritual life, and on analogy with physical nourishment it should be taken regularly, a little at a time, well digested.²

The early monks considered Scripture an essential tool on the spiritual journey. Monks believed that the inspired Word of God had the power to transform those who intentionally and prayerfully listened and meditated on what God had to say to them through the text. Because of its importance in their spiritual life, Monks dedicated hours daily to meditating and praying with Scripture. Through the practice of Lectio Divina, monks grew in their knowledge and love of God, self, and others – a pathway to humility and reverent obedience.

The Practice

We often think of prayer as something we initiate with our words to God. However, Lectio Divina reminds us that it is God who initiates prayer. Lectio Divina helps us recognize and accept the invitation to prayer from God through Scripture.

Guigo II, a twelfth century Carthusian monk, was the first to articulate Lectio Divina as a set of progressive movements he named **lectio, meditation, oratio, and contemplation**. In these movement we are welcomed to:

- Listen to what God wants to reveal through Scripture
- Reflect on what was heard
- Respond to God in prayer
- Rest in God's loving presence

Lectio Divina starts by choosing a short passage of Scripture. Next, prepare yourself by becoming still and quiet within. Release all thoughts, worries, and agendas to God. Sit silently in the presence of God for a few minutes. Once you become still, move through the practice as follows:

Lectio (reading, listening, attending): Start by reading a passage of Scripture slowly and attentively. As you read the passage, welcome God's invitation to an intimate conversation by opening yourself to what God wants to reveal. Notice any word or phrase that the Spirit highlights. Take your time. Re-read the passage as many times as you like, savoring the words, and listening between readings to how God speaks.

² McGregor, Robert G. "Monastic Lectio Divina." *Cistercian Studies* 6, no 1 1971, pp. 54-56.

Meditatio (meditate, reflect, ponder): Take whatever word or phrase that stands out and ponder its message to you. Meditate not only with your mind but also with your heart. What about this word or phrase resonates with your soul? How does it apply to your life today?

Oratio (speak, respond, pray): After hearing and pondering God's personal message to you, engage in conversation with God through prayer. Open yourself to being transformed through the word or phrase of Scripture. How is the Spirit calling you to respond? Maybe you are drawn to worship, confession, gratitude, or some action as a prayerful response to what you heard. Whatever response flows from your heart, offer it to God.

Contemplatio (contemplate, rest, be): As you bring your conversation with God to a close, rest with God in stillness, allowing yourself to release words and thoughts. Enjoy just being in the loving presence of God.

If you wish, write about your prayer experience in a journal. What is your word or phrase? What does God say to you through it? What does it have to say about your life right now?

Selecting a Passage

There are a variety of ways to select a passage of Scripture for Lectio Divina. Here are a few suggestions:

- Select one book of the Bible and practice Lectio Divina as you read through the book.
- Select familiar Scriptures that match your current mood (e.g., a lament or praise Psalm).
- Select Scriptures from a concordance on a specific subject (e.g., stewardship, joy, love, etc.).
- Select Scriptures from memory or that have personal significance for you.