

## MISSION: Prayer 12

### “Practically Speaking”

Sacred Scripture is a rich source of material for prayer. It's not the only kind of spiritual reading, but it's the best. After all, it's the Word of God. Pope Benedict XVI agreed. In his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* ("The Word of God"), Pope Benedict stated, "The word of God is at the basis of all authentic Christian spirituality" (86). This is because "all scripture is inspired by God" (2 Tm 3:16). What other book can truthfully make that claim? Not a one. So let's focus a bit more on the special role of the Bible in our life of prayer.

If you've ever cracked open the missal during Mass or plopped down in your plush recliner to read the Bible, you've probably noticed it spans a long time and has many human authors. As such, it contains different writing styles and genres. There are narratives, poems, parables, prophecies, and so forth. But while many human authors wrote it over the ages, the *Catechism* tells us that God is "the principal author of Sacred Scripture" (304). That's why reading the Bible isn't like reading any other book. It's a sacred text. Therefore, "prayer should accompany the reading of sacred Scripture" (*Dei Verbum* 25). And using Scripture to pray is an ancient form of prayer called *Lectio Divina*.

### *Lectio Divina*

*Lectio Divina* is essentially reading and praying over the Bible. Pope Benedict XVI attributes a "primordial role" in its development to Origen (third century), from whose works Sts. Ambrose and Augustine learned the method. "While you attend to this *Lectio Divina*," says Origen, "seek aright and with unwavering faith in God the hidden sense which is present in most passages of the divine Scriptures."<sup>62</sup>

Because it's the story of how we're saved, the Bible is an essential part of our dialogue with God. "When you read the Bible," says St. Augustine, "God speaks to you; when you pray, you speak to God." *Lectio Divina* is important because it leads to an "encounter with Christ, the living Word of God."<sup>64</sup> Far from mere reading, it's an engagement with divinity. If you've tried it, you might have noticed it basically follows the same format as other types of meditation. But since the Bible is a divine text, *Lectio Divina* is in a league by itself. For this reason, it's one

of the most important tools in your prayer toolbox. There are four basic steps:  
Reading – Meditation – Prayer - Contemplation

Reading Scripture is a bit trickier than reading some other types of literature. After all, it's a pretty ancient text, and unless we're familiar with the age in which it was written, it's not always clear what's going on. So the first step when reading the Bible is to determine the literal sense. The question we ask ourselves is, "What is the author of this passage trying to say?" This puts the passage in its original context and ensures we're starting from the right spot. (A solid commentary or good Bible dictionary is a necessity.)

Once we have a decent idea of what's being said, we move to meditation. At this point we're asking: What does this text say to me personally? Is there something here that catches my attention? Is the Lord speaking to me? If yes, this moves us to pray. If no, keep reading. As noted in a previous chapter, true prayer doesn't consist of method. It's the result of the method. True prayer is the movement of the heart toward God.

Lectio Divina concludes with contemplation, "during which we take up, as a gift from God," says Pope Benedict, "his own way of seeing and judging reality" (*Verbum Domini* 87). In other words, contemplating Scripture gives us the mind of Christ so we can see the world as it really is. It gives us the ability to discern the "thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Heb 4:12). This is the power of reading and praying over the Word of God.

Guigo the Carthusian, who was either a twelfth-century monk or local Italian muscle, wrote a masterpiece on Lectio Divina called *The Ladder of Monks*. (I guess that answers the question.) He summarizes the method in this manner: "Reading seeks the sweetness of the blessed life, meditation finds it, prayer asks for it, and contemplation tastes it."<sup>65</sup> Tastes it? Yep. True to his ethnicity, Guigo compares it to eating a fine meal. "Reading places solid food in the mouth; meditation chews and breaks it; prayer extracts the flavor; contemplation is the very sweetness that gives joy and refreshes." (Anyone else getting hungry?) Guigo must have been looking at the same menu as the psalmist who proclaims, "Taste and see that the Lord is good!" (Ps 34:8).

"Read, meditate, pray, contemplate - Hey, Padre, didn't you say contemplation isn't something we can make happen on our own?" Yes, and I commend you. Go grab a cheap, plastic, imported toy out of the prize box. Yes, contemplation is a gift from God. We can't conjure it up on our own. Likewise, Lectio Divina isn't something that you can simply whip out of your pocket and complete whenever you feel like it. Our lives are meant to be constant, living prayers. Lectio (as the cool kids call it) must be prepared for and practiced repeatedly. It's an extension of the rest of your life. Otherwise, says Guigo, the "exterior letters will not profit the reader at all."

While Lectio Divina has grown in popularity over the last few years, there's an aspect about it that not many consider, but is vitally important. Because it's based on Scripture, Lectio is far more effective and fruitful when you know more about the overall story of the Bible. When you read the masters of this method like Guigo, you quickly realize that much of this kind of prayer makes connections to other parts of the Bible, the big story of our salvation. So if you don't already know the Bible relatively well, make an effort to grow in your knowledge so as to make your prayers over it richer.

Finally, as with all kinds of prayer, Lectio Divina is meant to lead to action. It's meant to transform the way we live. We don't "put on the mind of Christ" just to think differently. Lectio is meant to make us more humble, more patient, more loving - more like Christ.

### ***Psalm Response***

Praying the Scriptures is always valuable, but certain parts of the Holy Writ stand out. Among them would be Psalms, the "masterwork of prayer in the Old Testament" (CCC 2585). The psalms are so important that we hear them at every celebration of Mass. And they're not simply read. "The Psalter is the book in which the Word of God becomes man's prayer," says the *Catechism* (see 2587). In other words, we're praying the very words of God back to God. That's powerful.

Even more interesting, Jesus prayed the psalms. Think about that for a moment. God himself was praying the Word of God back to God. Whoa! I guess if the incarnate Second Person of the Trinity thinks it's important to pray the psalms, we should, too.

Psalms is an interesting book because often there are a couple of things going on at once. On the one hand, they frequently recount stories of God's great works in the history of Israel. They tell a story. But at the same time, the psalms express the reflections and musings of the human author's experience. And even though the literal events discussed in the book of Psalms are ancient history, because they are written from the heart of human experience, they are easy to apply to our daily lives. If you've spent any time reading or praying them, you've probably noticed an almost automatic tendency to become the "I" in the psalms. They're very personal.

There are few people on this earth, for example, for whom Psalm 23 doesn't resonate: "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.... Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for thou art with me." We've all been there, haven't we?

Psalm 51 was originally written by King David after he committed adultery with Bathsheba. Crushed with shame and sorrow he cried out: "Have mercy on me, O God, according to thy steadfast love. Wash me thoroughly from iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!" (w. 1-2). The psalms were written around three thousand years ago, but tell me they don't apply to you today. Go ahead, I triple-dog dare you. If you're not already doing so, start praying the psalms. Now let's talk about something else.

### ***Prayer on the Hour***

The Liturgy of the Hours is primarily made up of psalms, hymns, and other readings from Scripture that are prayed at certain times of the day. It's a bit more detailed than I have time for here, but the Liturgy of the Hours basically consists of morning (Lauds), daytime (Terce, Sext, or None depending on the time they're prayed), evening (Vespers), and night prayers (Compline).

As with so many other aspects of the Catholic faith, the Liturgy of the Hours finds its origin in the Bible itself. In Scripture we frequently see references to certain times of the day when prayers were offered. For example, in the Acts of the Apostles we read, "Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour" (3:1). The ninth hour was about three in the afternoon, the time of the evening sacrifice. This marked the end of the Jewish day.

While praying at the same hour of the day, the centurion Cornelius received a vision instructing him to send men to see Peter. When they arrived, Acts tells us that Peter was praying up on the roof at "about the sixth hour" (noon) (10:9).

By praying at set times during the day, the apostles and other early Christians were continuing the tradition handed on to them by their forefathers. For example, Daniel, patron saint of all lion tamers (at least he should be), was visited by an angel in a similar manner to Cornelius while praying "at the time of the evening sacrifice" (Dn 9:21). Daniel prayed "three times a day" (Dn 6:10). In fact, that's why he got tossed into the lion's den in the first place. To this day, Jews continue to pray three times a day.

The Liturgy of the Hours establishes a rhythm of prayer set to the beat of our lives. It keeps us focused on what is most important, most essential. By setting aside certain times for prayer, we're putting the world on pause and periodically putting ourselves back in the presence of God. It's all about preserving right order in our lives. If you've never tried it, I encourage you to give the Liturgy of the Hours a "go." It can really transform your prayer life.

### ***Reading Is Fundamental***

"Once a kid starts to read, the world is an open book." Remember that line? You will if you're anywhere near my age and watched Saturday morning cartoons (eating a big bowl of Cap'n Crunch until the roof of your mouth bled). The slogan is from those "Reading Is Fundamental" commercials. They were right, of course. Reading is important for natural growth. But it's even more fundamental for spiritual growth.

Unfortunately, times have changed since that commercial first ran. Video killed the radio star, and the Internet changed the way we read. Take it from a guy who travels a lot: it's increasingly rare to see people looking at magazines on flights, much less reading books with no pictures. They're glued to gaming devices, phones, or movies on their computers.

And it's not just technology. The society around us has changed, too. The world is a far more secular place than it was one hundred, twenty-five, or even five years ago. It's a challenge to find people whom you can implicitly trust, people who

share the same faith and follow the same moral compass. (The arrow should always point up.) Religion is barely talked about in groups unless it's in reference to some scandal. Perhaps worse, religious conversation often deteriorates until it is nothing more than a platform from which someone spouts his often problematic opinion. Society has drifted so far from God, that as individuals we need to make a pointed effort to offset negative influences. If we don't, we'll go down faster than the Titanic. That's why spiritual reading is so important. But we have to choose wisely.

In case you haven't noticed, many things we tend to consume these days in books and magazines, and on the Internet, aren't designed to encourage reflection. We're spoon-fed garbage with sugar coating (like Fruity Pebbles). Captivating, often provocative photos and punchy headlines draw us in like mosquitoes to the blue light. "It's so beautiful ...

When secular media finally decides to get "serious" - that is, newscaster with thoughtful eyes and a furrowed brow - how often is it about God? (Questioning his existence doesn't count.) We're far more likely to see a prime-time story on the alarming increase in the number of people eating french fries than those dying without the sacraments.

Even worse than serious coverage about not necessarily serious issues, we're constantly assaulted with images of transitory things: cars, jewelry, beer, whatever. If we're not careful, these temporal goods can easily distract us from eternal goods. It's vital that we continually remind ourselves of the shortness of this life, that we're just passing through on our way (Lord willing) to everlasting bliss. We must rise above the vacuous society in which we live and immerse ourselves in material that will enflame our hearts. That's the role of spiritual reading, and it's so important that some spiritual writers deem it almost as important as prayer itself.

Don't get me wrong, though, I'm not saying we want to lose touch with culture. On the contrary, we need to be aware of what's out there and what's happening. The goal is to move it back toward God, to move people back toward him. But we can't lead anybody anywhere if we're stuck in the slime and muck. So what do we do? Temper our intake of secular culture. Definitely tune out blatant immorality

because it will kill your soul. And watch your intake of the rest of it, too. You can't eat sugar all the time and expect to stay healthy.

But it's not just a matter of turning off your television or shutting down the computer for a bit. Unless you're seeking some meditative silence, you've got to fill that time with something good. Otherwise you'll simply turn to other distractions. Grab some good reading and feed your soul.

While there's no set list of what you should read, I'm more than willing to make some suggestions. As indicated earlier, don't leave your Bible on the shelf. It's the only one of the books you own that is divinely inspired. And if you're going to read it, start with the Gospels. Since our aim is to be like Jesus Christ, what better way to achieve that end than to read about his life and hear what he has to say? Other "no brainer" resources are the *Catechism*, saints' books, or any of the classics from the multitude of great Catholic authors.

Good reading elevates. It can show us how to live and how to please God. It can teach us who he is. The Doors singing, "Hello, I love you, won't you tell me your name" isn't based on reality. You can't fall in love with someone you don't know. Relationship with God isn't based on fleeting feelings. It's grounded on knowledge acquired by faith and reason.

It's entirely possible that some of you are presently thinking: "I don't have to elevate myself any more, Padre. I climbed through thirteen years of Catholic school (sixth grade twice)." If that thought passed through your brain, consider this. One of the most educated and intelligent theologians in the history of the Church, Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, was so awed by a vision he had of God and the realization of how little he knew, he called all of his writings - including his massive compilation of theology called the *Summa Theologica* - nothing but "straw."

We're never going to plumb the depths of God. But we need to maintain the habit of spiritual reading because the more we know of him, the more we'll love him. It couldn't be simpler. There's no rocket science about it, no universal criteria. Read as the Spirit moves you. If after a few minutes you've got a lot to chew on, don't go further. Spiritual reading is very closely related to mental prayer. In fact, if it's doing its job, it will drive you to your knees.

## *Take-Home Test*

Before allowing yourself the nighttime pleasure of silent contemplation under the influence of the holy comforter - that is, going to bed - it's a good idea to have a look back at the day through what's known as an examination of conscience. It's exactly what it sounds like. When you examine your conscience you reflect on how you're doing spiritually; whether or not you're progressing in holiness. Simply scan back over the events of the day to see what you did right and what you did wrong. Then thank God for what went well, and pray for grace to correct the weak spots.

The examination of conscience sounds a lot like the examination of self we perform while standing in line for confession. ("Let's see, I lost my temper twice, gossiped, set the cat on fire. I wish this priest would hurry up. Nuts! Now I have to confess impatience.") It's not the same thing, though they're somewhat similar.

St. Ignatius Loyola, who made this kind of examination central to his spirituality, defines two different facets or types of examination: general and particular. The general exam is what we've already alluded to: an overall inventory of spiritual growth. The particular examination deals with specific vices we're trying to eliminate or virtues we're trying to develop.

A trick that helps make your nightly examination more pleasant is to make a resolution in the morning to overcome a particular fault with which you've been dealing. "O God, please help me not talk badly about so and so because he's so ... oops." Before your feet hit the floor make a decision to do your best in that area. Then, in the evening, you can review how well you did.

While the examination of conscience is a very important tool, it's not a substitute for regular prayer. They're both important, but the examination focuses on us, while prayer focuses on God.