



Dear Friend,

Monastic and liturgical communities have, for many centuries, begun their daily prayer by singing Psalm 95 as an invitation to worship. The psalmist encourages us to sing aloud to God, to celebrate his creation, to recognize his care for us. But the psalm also contains a strong challenge: “Today, listen to the voice of the Lord!” (v. 7). Each day those who, like myself, worship in this traditional way are urged to open their hearts afresh to the living word of God—a reminder we all need to hear as often as possible.

Every key period in the grand narrative of grace has been characterized by a fresh engagement with the word of God. Think of some of the landmark moments in Scripture:

- The universe itself was called into creation by the voice of God: “And God said, ‘Let there be light’” (Gen. 1:3).
- God set apart the Hebrews as his chosen people by sealing a covenant with them at Sinai, a covenant he himself spoke and wrote: “And God spoke all these words . . .” (Exod. 20:1).
- King David renewed his people’s commitment to the covenant, and in response God promised to establish an eternal royal line through his descendants: “A son, the fruit of your body, will I set upon your throne” (Ps. 132:11).
- The rediscovery of the Book of the Law under King Josiah set the stage for a revival of faith that helped sustain the Jews throughout their Babylonian exile: “The king . . . renewed the covenant in the presence of the Lord” (2 Kgs. 23:3).
- Ezra’s preaching of Scripture helped re-establish the covenant faith in Israel after the exile: “All the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law” (Neh. 8:3).
- In Jesus, the fullness of God’s Word was revealed at the very turning point of history: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (Jn. 1:14).
- The apostles, especially Peter and Paul, drew on Scripture to preach the gospel, using the Bible as a firm foundation on which to build Christ’s Church: “Devote yourself to the public reading of Scripture, to preaching and to teaching” (1 Tim. 4:13).

That pattern—of great turning points being marked by a return to Scripture—has continued to be played out in the history of the Church to the present day. Think of the great upsurge in biblical scholarship and translation stimulated by the desert monastics. Remember the Benedictine passion for study and manuscript copying, which helped preserve the text of the Bible during the

Dark Ages. Consider how immersed the early Franciscans and Dominicans were in the Gospels. Reflect on the central role of Bible reading and interpretation in both the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation. In recent centuries, think on the inspirational role of Scripture in the modern missionary movements. The examples are almost innumerable, and their import is very clear: the renewal of the Church will always stem from a renewed reading of the Bible.

In our RENOVARÉ newsletters this year we have focused on a number of books which are tremendous resources for the spiritual life. We have considered contemporary masterpieces like Eugene Peterson's *The Jesus Way*, Joshua Choonmin Kang's *Deep-Rooted in Christ*, and *Life with God* by Richard J. Foster and Kathryn Helmers. We have also looked at a range of spiritual classics such as John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, A. W. Tozer's *The Pursuit of God*, and *The Francis Trilogy* by Thomas of Celano. During our review of *Life with God* we were able to spend some time reflecting on how we read the Bible for spiritual formation, including a very short piece on *lectio divina* or "divine reading." In this *Heart-to-Heart*, as we come back from these great books to the Great Book itself, we are going to look a little deeper into this ancient spiritual practice.

The roots of *lectio divina* lie back in the earliest days of the Christian church, especially in the teaching of the desert fathers and mothers and in the Benedictine tradition. The classic description of *lectio* was written sometime later, though, by a Carthusian prior called Guigo II who lived in the French Alps during the twelfth century. He writes about his thinking in a simple, unaffected way:

One day when I was busy working with my hands I began to think about our spiritual work, and all at once four stages in spiritual exercise came into my mind: reading (*lectio*), meditating (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*) and contemplation (*contemplatio*) . . . Reading is the careful study of the Scriptures, concentrating all one's powers on it. Meditation is the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one's own reason for knowledge of inner truth. Prayer is the heart's devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good. Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness (*Scala Claustralium*, chapter II).

Guigo is describing a way of reading Scripture which is quite different to the approach many of us have learned. This is not a "study" of Scripture, an attempt to draw out from the Bible eternal principles which we then teach others or apply in our own lives—coming to the Bible as though it were a user's manual for the Christian life. Guigo assumes that, when Paul writes that "all Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16), he is speaking less about issues of truth and infallibility, and more about the infusion of divine life itself into the text. So, when practicing *lectio*, we do not come looking for doctrines to be learned—we come looking for a Presence to be encountered. The Bible is not so much the stone tablets recording the law, as it is the burning bush from which God speaks . . . here and now.

Lectio divina begins, of course, with reading. A careful, attentive, prayerful, and open-hearted reading of the Bible. This takes time. We cannot read Scripture the way we read the *New York Times* or an article on Wikipedia. The Bible is not susceptible to skimming, to summarizing, to speed-reading; there is a fundamental difference between Google and the gospel. Scripture is deep, rich, complex, and multi-layered. It speaks through nuances and details. It yields its fruit slowly and gently. This means we need to find the right environment to practice *lectio* with prayerful

attention. We can, of course, read the Bible anywhere: on a train, in a mall, over a coffee in Starbucks. But some places are more conducive to *lectio* than others; a good length of time spent reading in uninterrupted quiet is essential. For some, that is hard to achieve. Try not to fret about this: take what time you can, where you can. A good half hour once a week is better than a frantic five minutes every day.

Reading leads to meditation (*meditatio*). Christians of past generations had a very rich idea of what the inspiration of Scripture might mean: for them, it meant that the consistent character and purposes of God were reflected in every part of the Bible, so each passage of the Bible spoke to all other passages. We see this in Paul's letters: the lives of Sarah and Hagar are figures of the two covenants (Gal. 4:12); the Hebrews drank water from the rock, and that rock was really Christ (1 Cor. 10:4); the veil over the glory of Moses' face is the veil over the hearts of those who do not receive Christ (2 Cor. 3:15). Meditation is the process of slow reflection on Scripture that allows these perpetual echoes to be heard, so that over time the various voices and stories of the Bible integrate into the one great narrative of God and creation. By reflecting on Scripture, we allow the Spirit to speak through the words of the many human authors; we take *inspiration* seriously.

After meditation comes prayer, *oratio*. But this is not the place to lay down the Bible and take up our intercession lists. When we speak of prayer in the process of *lectio*, we are speaking of allowing the text to draw us beyond the page into the Presence. As we listen for the voice of the Spirit in Scripture, so we respond to the Spirit present within us. We transform our reading into conversation, sharing with God our responses to the text, the concerns it raises, the memories it provokes, the people it reminds us about. In turn, we listen for God's direct and present voice replying, bringing the text alive in our current

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- We urge everyone to give first to their local church (or wherever they are being nurtured spiritually) and to the poor before ever giving to RENOVARÉ.
- An accountant oversees our financial records in accord with accepted accounting procedures and the highest professionalism.
- We will live within our means. One thing we refuse to do is overextend and overspend ourselves and then beg for God's people to bail us out. We believe that God will give us the money to do what we are being called to do. We feel it involves just as much faith to trust God for the money before a purchase as after a purchase. In fact, one way we discern God's will for the ministry of RENOVARÉ is through the financial support of his people.
- We believe in full disclosure at all times. Our financial reports are available to anyone upon request.
- We will receipt all donations.
- If we offer books, CDs, DVDs, or other materials for a suggested contribution, we will receipt the amount given above the retail price of the product plus shipping and handling costs.
- When we make a purchase, we will pay the bill within thirty days. We refuse to subsidize this ministry on the backs of vendors.
- We will never sell or rent our mailing list.
- We are primarily a volunteer organization and as such we depend in large measure upon the sacrificial labors of many. If, however, we employ paid staff, they will receive equal pay for equal work.
- We will communicate our financial needs to our constituency as clearly and as truthfully as possible. We will not inflate or overstate our situation, nor create a crisis to boost income.
- We believe RENOVARÉ was initiated and continues to be sustained by God. While we are eager to follow the Divine whisper at every turn and work with all our might, it is God's business and not ours to prosper or end the work of RENOVARÉ. We rejoice either way.

experience. We allow the living and active word to speak into our lives, to challenge and provoke us, to comfort and console us.

And finally we come to rest in contemplation—perhaps the least understood movement in *lectio divina*. We often use the word “contemplation” to mean thinking; perhaps, then, contemplation is yet more reflecting on the words of the passage? No. In the Christian tradition, *contemplatio* is becoming still in the presence of God, neither speaking nor necessarily being spoken to, but simply waiting attentively and lovingly on God. Think of the way old friends can allow conversation to drift into companionable silence. When our relationship is deep and rich enough, we do not need to talk all the time: it is enough just to be together. This is *contemplatio*. We have allowed Scripture not only to increase our knowledge of God, but also to entice us into deeper relationship with God.

We who long for the renewal of the Church need to long also for a renewed engagement with Scripture, which in turn makes possible a renewed intimacy with God in Christ. I pray that, as we head into a new year, God will renew your reading of the Bible, and so your love and desire for him. Read to know, but even more—read to love!

Every blessing,

Christopher S Webb

Christopher S. Webb, TSSF
RENOVARÉ President

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