



INTIMACY WITH JESUS THROUGH SCRIPTURE

Opening our Minds and Hearts to Christ

Every Catholic I know has expressed a desire to know God’s personal direction for his or her life. Sometimes, it’s a yearning to know the big picture. More frequently, it’s a crisis-oriented cry for help regarding the practical decisions we are all faced with on a daily basis. But whether we realize it or not, more than a word of guidance, what we really need is to know the Guide. More than the answer to a specific prayer, what really matters, is knowing that the Answerer has heard our cry and we have somehow sensed His Presence.

The relationship is what really counts. It is the Lord Himself who not only guides our ship, but also calms the water, and harbors our hurting, lonesome hearts. Indeed, “In God alone there is rest for my soul . . .” (*Psalm* 62:1).

So, how can we dispose our hearts to hear from the Lord personally? How does He speak directly, concretely, recognizably, to our hearts? More importantly, how can we learn to spend time with, be with Jesus, not for something we can get, but simply because of WHO He is. The defining characteristic of Christian prayer, expressed so beautifully by Fr. Thomas Dubay in his *Fire Within*, is that it is “preeminently a profound personal love union with God.”

One of the most reliable and privileged meeting places for this very real, speaking-listening relationship to take place, is in the prayerful pondering of Scripture. The following is a progression we can use to help open our ears and hearts to, not only the Lord’s very personal word to us, but to the reality of His Presence with us throughout our day.

This prayerful progression using Scripture is the timeless *Lectio Divina*, and it is not a technique, but rather a way that incorporates the natural development of relationship—prayer is relationship—as we pray with the Scripture. It is not a method of human invention, but derives from the way God has touched and drawn human hearts down through the ages. It happens automatically, really, as we sincerely spend time with the Word of God and seek to practice its direction; however, an instructed awareness of the progression can help our participation in it.

The four movements of deepening engagement with God through Scripture are: reading (*Lectio*), reflecting (*Meditatio*), spontaneous prayer (*Oratio*), and resting in God (*Contemplatio*).

First, we need to choose a time and place—to make a date, if you will, with the Lord. It’s helpful to find a place that is set apart, free from distractions, comfortable, pleasant, and quiet. In the beginning, I think it’s especially important to go to the same place; a place that’s used exclusively for this time of prayer, for the sake of developing a committed practice. In some cases, that might mean simply repositioning a chair, facing a picture of Our Lord or a Crucifix, or lighting a candle. For some, it’s possible to spend this time in the Presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament. The important thing we bring to this practice is our desire for God, and our faithfulness to the committed time.

It is advantageous to select a time that’s closest to our best time of day, acknowledging our personal early bird or night owl propensities. However, what is possible is more important than when is best, or, more than likely, carving out time to at least be available for an encounter with the Lord won’t happen at all.

Choosing a good Bible translation is also significant. It needs to be accurate, but should read easily and speak to the heart, not just the head. Personally, I find the Jerusalem Bible readable and helpful.



Some like to pray the Scripture using one of the readings from daily Mass or the Liturgy of the Hours. If one is not committed to a particular directive in this matter, personal taste, in conjunction with the peaceful leading of the Holy Spirit, should be our guide. For those who have never prayed one of the Gospels, from start to finish, moving through the inspired narrative using *Lectio*, is an awesome, indelible experience. St. Luke's Gospel is an excellent starting place as it includes the wondrous account of Our Lord's birth and infancy.

Walking Through the Process

Using the chronological order of St. Luke's Gospel, let's simply walk through, for the purpose of example, the process of *Lectio Divina*.

Read

- It's best, initially, not to exceed 20-25 verses for each meditation. If that seems to be too much, use 10-15 verses.
- In the Bible, begin with Luke, Chapter 1, verses 1-25 (this includes the headings "Prologue" and "The birth of John the Baptist is foretold"). Bibles with sectional headings can be helpful in dividing the Scripture into cohesive portions.

Reflect

- Limit your "re-telling" or "re-writing" to 5-6 sentences. Keep it simple—as if explaining it to a small child. Journaling one's responses/reflections during or after the period of meditation can be very helpful.

Spontaneous Prayer

- The purpose of this step is to help us move from the head to the heart. Through our identification with a person in the passage we become personally involved and are more open interiorly to the movements of the Holy Spirit. If you don't feel particularly drawn to any person in the text, simply be present as a silent observer.
- If the passage does not specifically name persons in the text, simply see if the words themselves evoke any particular feeling. Does it call to mind a previous, or presently occurring, incident or relationship in your life?
- This heart to heart conversation with Jesus is indispensable to our deepening relationship with Him.
- Note any word or phrase that moves, stirs, touches, quickens or resonates within your heart.

Resting in God

- Be still and know that God is God. Wait. Listen.

Having read these supplementary instructions once, check them periodically for reminders. Bring only your Bible and the *Lectio* to the actual time of prayer. Try not to add distractions to your prayer period with accessory reading. We have a tendency to be scattered and jump from one novena or prayer card, to another. This disallows our openness to a simple, one on one, face-to-face encounter with Our Lord through the particular passage of Scripture at hand. It is a major reason why people do not grow in prayer.

Initially, this process might seem a little mechanical and somewhat academic. However, it begins to bear fruit as we discover and experience the absolutely unique and personally exquisite way the Lord communicates direction, and more importantly, Himself, to us. His love verily spills over into all the remaining moments of our day and night, as we remain faithful to this consecrated time.

It's good to start out by using *Lectio* for 15 minutes every day. For most, however, this amount of time is not going to seem sufficient. Rather than add time daily to complete the process, it's best to simply pick up where



we left off the next day, taking 2-3 days, if necessary, to move through the 4 steps. Initially, holding carefully to, and not exceeding, the 15-20 minute time period is actually very important. This will facilitate the development of a steady, habitual discipline that will become natural and as much a part of one's day as breathing. Try to avoid the feast or famine pattern of prayer, which will never hold up under the influence of the constantly fluctuating circumstances and feelings of our too-busy lives. We can always add time later with the assisted discernment of a spiritual director.

After the 4 steps have been completed, it's advisable to return on the following day to those words or reflections that moved or somehow deeply touched our hearts. To sit with, stay with, savor, and relish these whisperings from the Lord, allow their richness to sink deeply and hold—hopefully rivet—our heart to the Heart of God in Jesus Christ.

It's important not to move on to the next passage until we have a clear sense that the present one is finished. We must remember that our meditation is a means—growth in relationship with Jesus is the end. And love cannot be rushed!

Generally speaking, then, it requires a minimum of 3 days (when spending a 15-20 minute period each day) to complete the *Lectio* process with a passage of Scripture. During the first 2 days, one should move slowly through the 4 steps, returning on the third day to revisit, taste more deeply, better appreciate, those points where we have experienced the Lord's personal inspiration, or felt His presence, be it consoling or challenging. It's this returning that is the secret to intimacy with Jesus. As we slow down our time spent with a passage of Scripture and practice the process of *Lectio*, we'll come to better understand a principle from Ignatius of Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises*: "it is not much intellectual knowledge, but to feel and taste things interiorly, that fills and satisfies the soul."

It is important to be receiving regular spiritual direction to allow for necessary individual adaptations. As prayer matures, it simplifies. As one grows in prayer, the need for the "co-discernment" of good spiritual direction will increase, not lessen.

We quickly come to realize that Jesus is the initiator and Lord of this encounter; He desires it even more than we do. Allowing Him to draw us to Himself in this way, we come to understand and join our exclamation to that of St. Paul as he says, "Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (*Phil* 3:8). This knowing, this coming to be ever more deeply and intimately united with Him, keeps us literally running to this sacred time and place of heartfelt prayer!



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