

Piercing the Clouds

Lectio Divina and Preparation for Ministry

Edited by

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Introduction

Our earliest description of a four-step *lectio divina* (spiritual or “divine” reading) conceives of the steps as so many rungs of a ladder reaching up into the heavens. Carthusian Prior Guigo II wrote this description, in which he develops his metaphor of the ladder: “It has few rungs, yet its length is immense and wonderful, for its lower end rests upon the earth, but its top pierces the clouds and touches heavenly secrets.”¹ Nearly everyone who has heard of *lectio divina* has learned Guigo’s four steps for the prayerful reading of sacred Scripture: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio* (reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation). Even so, Guigo does not insist upon the ladder but hastens to add another metaphor, that of taste.² Upon reaching the ladder’s *contemplatio* rung, the mind has ascended so high that “it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness.”³

To use Guigo’s language, this book’s six essays pertain to the “piercing of the clouds,” which characterizes *lectio divina* practiced well. Furthermore, the essays give special attention to the practice of *lectio divina* during preparation for ministry, especially the ministry of Catholic priests. That being said, any current or prospective Bible-reader can profit from this book; most of its content applies not only to Catholic seminarians, but to literate Christians in general.

1. Guigo II, *Ladder of Monks 2*, trans. Edmund Colledge and James Walsh, in *The Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981), p. 68.

2. Daniel Keating, “*Oratio* and *Contemplatio* (and *Actio*) of *Lectio Divina*,” 98–110, at 100 of the present volume.

3. Guigo II, *Ladder of Monks 2*, p. 68.

INTRODUCTION

Each of the six authors presented a preliminary version of his essay during the conference “Exegesis, *Lectio Divina*, and the Ministry of the Word,” held June 7–9, 2017 at The Saint Paul Seminary (University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota). My colleague and coeditor, Scott Carl, organized and hosted this conference, which was sponsored by the Msgr. Jerome D. Quinn Institute for Biblical Studies. At that time, Carl was director of the institute, and I assisted him in his duties as host. He took responsibility for selecting the speakers (and other participants), who came by invitation only. Carl then began the editorial process as the sole editor, selecting certain conference essays for publication and sending each of them to a single reviewer for double-blind peer review. Carl’s increased administrative responsibilities at the seminary, however, prevented him from advancing the project. Therefore, I took over editorial responsibility at the same time that I assumed Carl’s former position as director of the Quinn Institute in the summer of 2019. Since then, the institute has been renamed as an endowment, one of several that fund the Institute for Catholic Theological Formation at our seminary. Since I am the director of this new institute, I continue to oversee the Quinn Endowment, which has sponsored this book’s publication.⁴

When I acquired the essays from Carl, he had already received the blind reviewers’ approvals for each one. I read the essays critically and requested further editing by each author, though I judged some chapters to need only the smallest of adjustments. I commend all the authors for their willingness to revise their essays long after composing them, and for their humility in accepting corrections (more often, suggestions) from the reviewers and me. Their commitment to scholarship, which in the summer of 2017 enriched a score of biblical professors teaching in Catholic seminaries, now stands to benefit a larger audience and to make a lasting impact on the Church. It is my honor, now, to summarize each of their essays.

Laurence Kriegshauser, OSB, has contributed the first chapter, titled “Western Monastic Tradition of *Lectio Divina* and Seminary Formation.” He devotes the longest section of his three-part essay to the history of *lectio divina*, beginning with the reception of sacred Scripture in the early Christian liturgical assembly. Kriegshauser proceeds to highlight third-century Fathers who encouraged extra-liturgical Scripture reading and reflection, a practice that continued to develop as the eremitical life and monasticism flourished as paths

4. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my editing and production team for their work on this volume: Erika Zabinski, copyeditor and indexer; Maggee Becker, proofreader; and Judy Gilats, typesetter. Your skills and diligence are appreciated.

to Christian perfection. Eventually, Benedict of Nursia and others established monastic rules that inculcated the prayerful reading of Scripture, especially the Psalms. *Lectio divina* finally gained its classical formulation, which can be traced as far back as the Carthusian Prior Guigo II in the late twelfth century: *lectio, meditatio, oratio, contemplatio* (reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation). Kriegshauser completes the historical arc of *lectio divina* by pointing out salient developments in the late Middle Ages, through the modern period, and up until the present day. In the second part of his essay he describes the characteristics of *lectio divina*. A survey of diverse but complementary definitions by Louis Bouyer, Charles Dumont, Blessed Columba Marmion, Mariano Magrassi, and C. Jean-Nesmy suggest that this practice, which aims at personal union with God, cannot be definitively captured in any one description. Nevertheless, Kriegshauser helpfully distills four dimensions of *lectio divina*: it is 1) affective, engaging “the whole person, mind and heart, soul and body”;⁵ 2) relational, between the reader and the Lord; 3) transformative for the reader; and 4) ecclesial, building on the foundation of sacred history. In the third and final part of this chapter, Kriegshauser addresses the use of *lectio divina* in seminary formation, especially the experience at Kenrick-Glennon Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri. His description and honest assessment of practices will help other teachers and students to think about *lectio divina* in their own communities. As with *lectio divina* itself, which Kriegshauser humbly refrains from simplifying into a spiritual algorithm, so too he refrains from proposing a single formula for every seminary to implement.

Michael Magee surveys the treatment of John 6 in commentaries by Rudolf Bultmann (first edition by Bultmann in 1941), Rudolf Schnackenburg (first edition for John 5–12 in 1971), and coauthors Francis Martin and William F. Wright IV (2015), in his chapter “The Implications of Exegetical Method for *Lectio Divina*: John 6 as Treated in Three Commentaries.” Magee recognizes the need for a commentary to treat not only the historical critical dimension of the biblical text, but also the “second methodological level,”⁶ which takes into account the unity of all of sacred Scripture and the Church’s living tradition. Although Bultmann does recognize the biblical text (in this case, John 6) as presenting a spiritual challenge to the reader, Magee ultimately concludes that this commentary is ill-suited for *lectio divina*. Bultmann’s reordering of the text, and his conclusion that it contains passages which significantly distort Jesus’ message, suggest that it would be inappropriate for the practitioner

5. P. 22.

6. Pp. 31–32.

of *lectio divina* to read and reflect on John 6 in its canonical form in order to assimilate Jesus' message. Magee finds Schnackenburg's commentary less extreme in its reordering of John 6 and welcomes the attempt to integrate results of critical biblical studies into his confessional, Catholic interpretative framework. These characteristics suggest that this commentary provides a better preparation for *lectio divina* than does Bultmann's, but one may be disappointed in Schnackenburg's failure, in his treatment of John 6, to spiritually challenge the reader. The commentary by Martin and Wright devotes less attention to redaction criticism, but it does not reject historical critical analysis of the text. This commentary's orientation toward a less specialized audience, its willingness to treat the text in its canonical form, its acknowledgment of a single divine author of all Scripture, and its greater emphasis on situating John 6 within the broader Catholic tradition all recommend it for use in *lectio divina*.

Konrad Schaefer, OSB, contributed the chapter "*Lectio Divina* Fosters Growth and Formation."⁷ In the first half of this two-part essay, Schaefer provides the theological underpinnings for the practice of *lectio divina*. This prayerful approach to Scripture corresponds to its divine authorship; it would be inappropriate to focus exclusively on the human aspect of biblical literature without ever praying over it. A prayerful approach, however, does not exclude but rather complements biblical interpretation according to the historical critical method. Schaefer demands more of the reader than blind faith or cold textual analysis: he calls for "historical criticism complemented by friendship with God."⁸ In the second half of Schaefer's essay, he turns to more practical considerations for fostering *lectio divina* among students, especially candidates for the Catholic priesthood. For example, appreciation of reading in general disposes the student to appreciate the Bible. Moreover, we possess within our Judeo-Christian tradition models for fruitful Bible reading, such as midrashic re-reading of a biblical text, which discovers in the text new meaning and relevance within the reader's circumstances and cultural milieu. What does Nehemiah 8 narrate but the "exuberant collegial *lectio divina* on the day of the consecration of the new temple"? Since re-readings occur already within the Bible,

7. The chapter in this volume has some content that also appears in "*Divina lectio* y formación humana," by the same author, which appeared in *Efemérides Mexicana* 36, no. 106 (2018): 68–113. Nevertheless, the essay in the present volume differs from the Spanish one in much more than just its language of composition. Some of the topics treated are simply different. Furthermore, Schaefer revised the English essay according to my recommendations, after the Spanish one had already been published.

8. Pp. 60–64.

the contemporary interpreter can take a cue from the biblical text itself and make his or her own re-readings. Finally, the second half of the essay culminates in Schaefer's proposal for a "lectio seminar," which consists of prayerful group reading of the Sunday lectionary.

Marcin Kowalski uses the test case of Romans 7:7–25 to illustrate the importance of an objectively grounded reading of sacred Scripture for the meditation stage of *lectio divina*, in his chapter "Meditatio of Lectio Divina Following upon Exegesis-Informed Lectio: The Test Case of Romans 7:7–25." This passage, within a larger section on the fruits of justification (Romans 5–8), strikes a tone of desperation, in which Paul writes, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (7:24 RSV). Kowalski summarizes the many scholarly attempts to identify the *ego* of this apparently interruptive passage: Is it Paul? Israel? the Adamic *ego*? the Christian *ego*? Readers of Romans 7:7–25 tend to associate themselves personally with the sinful paralysis of the one who does not the good that one wants to do, but the evil that one detests (7:19); they implicitly identify the *ego* here as the Christian *ego*. Such an exegetically uninformed *lectio*, however, distorts one's *meditatio*. Kowalski avails himself of rhetorical criticism to explain why Romans 7:7–25 should instead be considered one of three proofs for establishing the contrast between sinful man and free humanity. By ruling out the common interpretation that this passage describes the Christian *ego* paralyzed by sin, Kowalski shows how these verses lead not so much to lamentation as to thanksgiving. A *lectio* of Romans 7:7–25 informed in this way leads the prayerful reader "to praise God for the undeserved and super-generous gift of new life in Christ which liberates us from the tyranny of Law and sin."⁹

Daniel Keating addresses the final stages of *lectio divina* in his chapter "Oratio and Contemplatio (and Actio) of Lectio Divina." He takes as his starting point Pope Benedict XVI's teaching on *lectio divina* as presented in the post-synodal apostolic exhortation on the word of God in the life and mission of the Church, *Verbum Domini*.¹⁰ Keating describes the earliest known presentation of the classical four stages of *lectio divina*, by Guigo II. Guigo's focus on the affective response to Bible reading put monks on guard against a merely rational reading of Scripture, an arid exercise. This would make his work popular in the Devotio Moderna of later centuries and, in fact, finds an echo in Benedict's own concerns. Both these men agree on the transformative nature

9. P. 97.

10. Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (September 30, 2010) (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2010), §82 and §86–87.

of *oratio*, but Benedict's description takes greater account of the variety of prayer beyond one's affective response. Furthermore, the pope's description of *contemplatio* contrasts with that of the monk. Benedict's terms of "vision" and "seeing" suggest the lively engagement of the intellect, whereas Guigo put the emphasis on the affective metaphor of "taste." Keating concludes by treating *actio* (action), a final step of *lectio divina* in addition to the classical fourfold description. Although Benedict adds *actio* without much description, Keating builds upon the thoughts of Augustine, Gregory the Great, and Thomas Aquinas to elaborate its place in *lectio divina*. A healthy tension between dedicating one's time to quiet contemplation and to activity in the service of one's neighbor ultimately reveals that *lectio divina* culminates in *actio*, and *actio* leaves the Christian needing to return to scriptural prayer for refreshment and renewed strength.

Anthony Giambrone, OP, transcends the boundaries of *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio* in his contribution, "*Exquisitio, Supplicatio, Praedicatio: Searching the Scriptures and the Mystery of Preaching.*" He advocates for saturation in sacred Scripture within Catholic seminaries, taking the post-Tridentine English College at Douay as a model. Giambrone recognizes, nevertheless, the greatly changed circumstances since then, in biblical studies and in the world. Critical commentaries do indeed enrich our *lectio* nowadays, but Giambrone warns against reliance on commentaries that engage the biblical text scientifically without ever arriving at the divinely revealed truths contained therein. Fruitful *lectio* requires prayer and meditation on the mysteries of sacred theology in addition to diligent study; this very sort of integration of the sacred page into the whole of the priestly formation program at Douay challenges our present-day paradigms. There, scriptural debate in the classroom fits into a larger theological and evangelical enterprise sustained by the reading of Scripture in one's own quarters, in the refectory, and in the chapel. Giambrone proceeds to discuss the transition from *lectio* to *oratio*: for him, the more robust alternatives to these two terms are *exquisitio* (the "searching" of the sacred text) and *supplicatio* (the "supplication" or prayer life of the reader). The early Church fathers and later Christian writers will inform these activities and allow the reader to assimilate time-tested spiritual readings. Finally, the priest culminates his *exquisitio* and *supplicatio* in *praedicatio* (preaching), which provides a practical focus and an eschatological terminus for *lectio divina*.

Guigo II provided a starting point for the description of *lectio divina* and the piercing of the clouds. The preceding summaries show how this book, in some ways, consolidates that tradition. Even more so, however, these essays develop the Catholic tradition of prayerful Bible reading; they point the way

to new, creative readings within the framework of a time-honored approach. Let this book serve as a stimulus to maintain and develop the practice of *lectio divina* in seminaries and in the whole Church. This can only redound to the praise of Jesus' name by Bible-immersed ministers of the Church and the lay faithful who follow their lead.

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