

Reading with the Heart

On the Art of Monastic Lectio Divina

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One of the most important spiritual disciplines set forth by St Benedict in his Holy Rule for monks is that of *lectio divina* - so vital a part of the daily discipline that he sets aside at least four hours of the daily schedule for it. As the monastic life sets a pattern for all Orthodox Christians to emulate and follow (insofar as they can), it can be helpful to look at this particular spiritual discipline and see how one might incorporate it into one's daily round.

What is *lectio divina* and how does one go about it?

So particular is the nature of this monastic work that monks often find the phrase untranslatable and simply call it their *lectio*. *Lectio* is of course the Latin for *reading*. From it we get such useful English words as *lecture*, *lectionary*, and *lectern*. But to assume that St Benedict is simply advising several hours of mere reading would be quite misleading. For what he has in mind is not mere reading - even of spiritual books - but of reading that is somehow divine.

In modern English the word *divine* has a rather narrow, adjectival sense, referring to the nature of God. We haven't entirely lost the wider, older usages but they are uncommon and quaint to the ear. For example, the noun *divine* - as in "the Cathedral of Saint John the Divine", or "a public debate between two noteworthy and learned divines" - means *theologian*. The word here does retain some of the pre-scholastic aura of the word, reminding us that mere book-knowledge of God does not make one a theologian. It is prayer - direct communion with God (the Divine) - that makes one a divine. The now rarely-used verb form of *divine*, (as in "to divine the criminal's secret purposes"), is also suggestive here, meaning *to learn and to know*, but in a thoroughly deep and intimate manner.

All of this is helpful in understanding what St Benedict wishes to teach us about *lectio divina*, for it helps us to see what he does not mean by the term. He is not suggesting several hours of theological studies each day. Nor is he suggesting hours of what we generally understand by the term *spiritual reading*. Instead he is actually talking about a form of prayer that involves the use of a book.

Since he was speaking of a discipline quite familiar to his hearers and readers, St Benedict felt no compulsion to define the term in his Holy Rule, but merely prescribed that it should be a major part of the daily regimen of his monks. It is we moderns who need to be clear about what he means for us to do and not to do. And his purpose is primarily not study, or learning, or edification, or self-improvement - but prayer, which must always be the central work of the monk and of the Orthodox Christian man or woman.

What he is conditioning his monks to do is to read in such a way that the reading becomes a base and a springboard for prayer. Once the prayer is attained the base falls away, the book is set aside, having achieved its purpose. Listen to a modern Orthodox theologian describe the process:

When a phrase or a word in a psalm, or in personal prayer, takes hold of our soul or makes the heart exult, we should stop and go deep into this 'intuition of God.' We should cease to multiply words, and find rather the silence in the heart of the word, the Spirit at rest in the Word.

- *The Roots of Christian Mysticism: Olivier Clement*

In doing *lectio*, we settle down quietly with a spiritual book, setting aside time and space that will be undisturbed. (The monastic notion of holy leisure - *otium sacrum* - is worthy of note in a future article). We begin quietly with a prayer to the Holy Spirit who fills all things and dwells in all places to guide and direct our time of *lectio*. We deliberately set aside all previous habits of study, scholarship, scanning a text. We abandon all preoccupation with quantity of reading, ("thirty pages by ten o'clock"), and allow ourselves to enter into the realm of quality. For we expect in *lectio divina*, being under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who guides us into all truth, that we will be led, by means of what we read, into the reality of communion and prayer with God, God will use a word or a phrase to allure us into communion with Him.

Hence our reading must be unhurried, must find its own pace and rhythm, must feel free to mull, to ponder, to weigh and relish a word or a phrase, to reread. In short, one must unlearn, at least for the time of *lectio*, many of the habits of reading for study or profit that we learned in school. They are designed to increase our knowledge, but *lectio* is designed to bring us to a state of prayer.

And yet there is one kind of learning we were given in school that can actually assist us in our *lectio*, for it is itself a pattern of *lectio* - a kind of reading not for scholarship or profit, a reading that encourages - even requires - mulling,

pondering, rereading, letting words work their wild magic upon us rather than our ensnaring and taming them in the nets of logic and reason. I am referring, of course, to the reading of poetry - becoming perhaps as lost an art as that of *lectio divina!*

The ancient Orthodox Fathers speak of the capacity within us to commune with God as the heart - not the mind or the senses. As the mediæval English writer of *The Cloud of Unknowing* wrote:

By love He may be gotten and holden, but by thought never.

The heart, in this sense, has the capacity to integrate the whole of us - body, sense, mind, soul, spirit - into a blessed wholeness, a harmony in which all our faculties bloom forth in truest spiritual health and we become a living hymn of praise - not by our words but in our very being.

Monastic *lectio* - which is nothing more or less than reading with the heart - is one of the means to such healing of our wounded being. It is an art worthy of cultivation by all Orthodox Christians as part of a well-balanced and fruitful life of prayer.

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