



# *Lectio Divina*

## **Growing Your Interior Life Through Mental Prayer**

**I**t's possible to believe that God exists, then to live our life as though He doesn't. It's possible to believe intellectually, and not love. But it's impossible to deny our desire for God. It's "*written in the human heart...; God never ceases to draw man to Himself*".<sup>1</sup> We desire to live life in Jesus Christ's presence, for His glory, according to His will, and out of love for His sacrifice and mercy. But how do we fulfill it? How do we develop a lasting relationship with Jesus Christ?

Mental prayer converts hearts and forms a prayer life that brings us to Jesus every day. It is "*an intimate sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.*"<sup>2</sup> *Lectio divina* is one of its most beautiful and timeless forms. It will help you to develop that relationship with Jesus you've desired. This guide introduces you to *Lectio Divina*.

## What is Lectio Divina?

*Lectio divina* means *divine reading*. It isn't an intellectual exercise. And it isn't a Bible study (although you might consult your study Bible). It's *praying* the Scriptures. With the prompting of the Holy Spirit, it quickly moves from the mind, to the heart and soul, and then to "*the experience of God Himself*."<sup>3</sup>

According to Pope Benedict XVI, *Lectio Divina* "*brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading **hears** God who is speaking, and in praying, **responds** to him with trusting openness of heart.*"<sup>4</sup> It's a deeply personal, affective conversation with God that can hold you in silent converse with Him throughout the day, renewed through a glance of faith.

## Prayer in union with the Church through the Holy Spirit

You don't pray in isolation. Pope Benedict reminds us that the object is "*to build communion, to unite us in the Truth along our path to God.*"<sup>5</sup> When we enter our room to pray in silence, we *always* pray with the Church.

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*The Holy Spirit is the "Master of Christian prayer," the "artisan of [its] living tradition."*<sup>7</sup>

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Through the Holy Spirit, baptism unites us as one Body in Christ, "*a living unity.*"<sup>6</sup> He guides us to pray within "*the great mosaic of the family of God.*"<sup>8</sup> When we pray in communion with the Holy Spirit, we pray "*in the Church.*"<sup>9</sup> He ushers us into the grandeur of Christ's salvific mission and into His presence in the Holy Eucharist.<sup>10</sup>

## A ladder to raise our hearts and minds to God

A popular description of *Lectio Divina* dates to 1150 and to a Carthusian monk named, Guigo II. He wrote to a fellow monk, Brother Gervase, describing his order's form of meditation as four rungs of the ladder. And so, his letter is called *The Ladder of Monks*.

According to Guigo, the ladder "*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.*"<sup>11</sup>



These rungs are **1) reading, 2) meditation, 3) prayer, and 4) contemplation**. Guigo sums up their relationship:

*Reading seeks for the sweetness of a blessed life, meditation perceives it, prayer asks for it, contemplation tastes it. Reading...puts food whole into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation is the sweetness itself which gladdens and refreshes. Reading works on the outside, meditation on the pith: prayer asks for what we long for, contemplation gives us delight in the sweetness which we have found.<sup>12</sup>*

## Lectio Divina Rungs

Although *Lectio Divina* climbs four separate rungs (the fifth rung, *Actio* is a recent addition), they eventually blend seamlessly. The ladder becomes an escalator. The object is union with God, not the process. So, avoid being overly scrupulous with each rung.



A daily discipline is crucial to developing your interior life, your relationship with Jesus Christ. So, set a specific time every morning for your mental prayer, spending 10-15 minutes when you first begin, then longer as you progress. You will reap the fruit of perseverance.

### Place yourself in the presence of God.

Choose the same quiet place, even the same section of the couch or the same chair, for your daily mental prayer. In time, it draws you into God's presence more readily than if you met Him in various places.

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*The heart is what we desire (Mt 6:21), the depth of our being, the place of our yes or no to God (CCC368), the place where our faith resides (Rm 10:8b-10).*

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Take time to remove all distractions, any obstacles between you and God. Wait until you are centered upon Him with a docile, receptive heart.

**Pray to the Holy Spirit for guidance.** Before stepping onto the first rung, pray for the Holy Spirit's guidance and inspiration. He opens your mind and heart to His will. He speaks to you personally, revealing insights He chose just for you.

Pray with words that originate from *within* your heart, or with words that speak *for* you from tradition (found at the end of this guide). Then, go to the daily reading ([usccb.org](http://usccb.org), click *Today's Reading*), preferably the Gospel where you will know Jesus more personally.

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## 1. Reading (*lectio*), the first rung



*"Reading comes first, and is...the foundation; it provides the subject matter...for meditation."* (Guigo II)

Begin by simply reading the passage in order to understand its true content: *"What does the biblical text say **in itself**?"*<sup>13</sup> Ground yourself in truth by reading your Bible's footnotes and the Catechism. When you read with the mind of the Church, you will seek, with confidence, the Holy Spirit's inspiration in a more personal, intimate way during meditation.

*"Trace a Sign of the Cross on the Scriptures,...kiss the cross you traced, and then begin to read very slowly and gently—out loud—seeking to absorb the words themselves along with any related ideas and images that surface from each word."*<sup>14</sup>

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## 2. Meditation (*meditatio*), the second rung



*"Meditation considers more carefully what is to be sought after; it digs, as it were, for treasure which it finds and reveals, but since it is not in meditation's power to seize upon the treasure it directs us to prayer."* (Guigo II)

Now, step onto the second rung, seeking the spiritual and personal inspiration of the text.<sup>15</sup> Revisit the words and phrases that stood out in your reading. Let them penetrate your heart and mind. *"Prostrate yourself before God and place your soul before Jesus Christ crucified."*<sup>16</sup>

To make your meditation more vivid, you might place yourself in the scene. For example, be a servant at the Last Supper, watching the events unfold.



Follow the promptings of the Holy Spirit for as long as they remain fruitful, then move on to the next word, phrase, or scene for further reflection.

**The Mind stands in the Heart.** The mind directs love to what is known. *“Knowledge...stirs up our wills to love the God whom we know”*.<sup>17</sup> The more we know Jesus and His sacrifice for us, the more we love Him. In a sense, the *“mind stands in the heart”*.<sup>18</sup> All truth and knowledge of Jesus finds a home in the heart where they coalesce into a profound love and intimate union with Him in the depths of the soul. This is the essence of *Lectio Divina*; each rung draws us closer to God.

**Finding the presence of God in your soul.** St. Teresa of Avila’s meditation found God’s presence within her soul where she centered all her *“reflection and affection on God...”*<sup>19</sup> Know His presence; seek a closer union with Him. Jesus Christ invites you to

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*“It would be a strange God who could be loved better by being known less. ... [E]very new thing known about God is a new reason for loving Him.*

*Theology and Sanity, Sheed*

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abide in Him (Jn 15:1), not for a moment, but always. To abide, is to reside and to make your home, to *be* and to stay *in* and *with* Jesus. In fact, He sent the *“Paraclete, that he may abide with you forever...he will abide with you and shall be in you”* (Jn 14:16-17).

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### 3. Prayer (*oratio*), the third rung



*“Prayer lifts itself up to God with all its strength, and begs for the treasure it longs for, which is the sweetness of contemplation.”* (Guigo II)

After seeking understanding and then reflecting, step to the third rung and ask the question, *“What do we say to the Lord in response to his word?”*<sup>20</sup> Converse naturally with God and respond with your heart, allowing yourself to be drawn into His life within your soul. Be docile to the Holy Spirit. Don’t leave this rung prematurely. Your conversation will draw you towards contemplation gradually.

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## 4. Contemplation (*contemplatio*), fourth rung



*“Contemplation when it comes, rewards the labors of the other three; it inebriates the thirsting soul with the dew of heavenly sweetness.” (Guigo II)*

*“Meditation requires reasoning and labor; contemplation is delight and forgetting of labor.”*<sup>21</sup> Your meditation and prayer bring a new clarity to your faith and to your life. You now see reality according to God’s will, and ask yourself, *“What conversion of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of [me]?”*<sup>22</sup> Form resolutions in order to grow in Christ’s likeness. Make them specific, few (1 or 2), and reasonable.

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*“Contemplation is an infused experience of the presence of God that gives light to the soul and warmth to the heart.”*<sup>24</sup>

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But contemplation is also a spiritual gift from God, *“a gaze of love.”*<sup>23</sup> You dispose yourself to this gift, but you don’t produce it. It comes as God wills. In contemplation, *“we encounter the Word himself.”*<sup>25</sup> ... *These moments can be fleeting or prolonged, subtle or pronounced.”*<sup>26</sup>

**Consolations come and go for the good of the soul.** God *may* give you *consolations*, an experience of His grace that is *“wholly spiritual”* and that *“makes the soul forget all earthly things.”*<sup>26</sup> He draws you to Himself in quiet union, giving you consolation when He deems it helpful to your soul. Typically, He offers it to a beginner of mental prayer as a sweet encouragement.

But God knows that if you grew accustomed to consolations, you might seek *them* instead of *Him*. So, He periodically withdraws consolations for the good of your soul. Accordingly, you grow in pure faith, eventually caring little for consolation’s reward.

*“These things all work together for your good, and you profit from His coming and from His withdrawal. ... He comes for your consolation, He goes away to put you on your guard, for fear that too much consolation should puff you up...[that you would] attribute this consolation, not to His grace but to your natural powers. ... And so, He withdraws Himself,...[to be] sought more eagerly, that having been sought for, He may at last be found with greater thankfulness.”*<sup>27</sup> (Guigo II)

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## 5. Action (*actio*)



*"[A]ction...moves the believer to make his or her life a gift for others..." (Verbum Domini 87, Benedict).*

*Lectio divina* is a means, not an end. It is more than consolation, more than private time with God. Its purpose is to hear the voice of God, to know how He wants you to serve, love, and glorify Him...*in the world*. *Lectio divina* must be applied in virtue.

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*"Inspire our actions,  
Lord, and accompany  
them with your help, so  
that our every word and  
action may always begin  
and end in you. Amen."*

*Actiones Nostras*

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After forming your resolutions, you might choose to record them in a journal. This booklet gives you space for your resolutions and notes on the last three pages. The act of recording gives concrete form to your thoughts and to the Holy Spirit's inspirations, and serves as a guide to your daily life.

Now, act upon them through amendment and through a pursuit of Christian Perfection. Be a witness for Christ!

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## 6. Concluding prayers

Now, your intimate prayer with Jesus Christ expands to include the Church, priests, family, friends, and more. Ask for the intercessions of the Blessed Virgin Mary, angels, and saints. Pray the *Our Father* and *Hail Mary*. Or, you might pray the *Prayer to Jesus*:



*O Jesus, living in Mary, come and live in thy servants, in the spirit of thy holiness, in the fullness of thy power, in the truth of thy virtues, in the perfection of thy ways, in the communion of thy mysteries; rule over every adverse power by thy Spirit, to the glory of the Father. Amen. (St. Louis de Montfort)*

**Waste time with God.** Our culture measures what we do by its material utility. So, by that standard, mental prayer appears to be a waste of time. But after Mass and Confession, it's the most important thing you can do. Grow your interior life through mental prayer!

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## Suggested prayers for preparation

**Come, Holy Spirit:** *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of thy faithful and kindle in them the fire of thy love. Send forth thy Spirit and they shall be created. And thou shalt renew the face of the earth. O God, Who by the light of the Holy Spirit didst instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and may ever enjoy His holy consolation. Through Christ our Lord, Amen*

**Prayer to know God's will:** *O Holy Spirit, soul of my soul, I adore you. Enlighten me, guide me, strengthen me, console me. Tell me what I ought to do. Give me your commands. I promise to submit myself to whatever you ask of me and to accept whatever you permit to happen to me. Grant only that I may know your holy will. Amen. (Cardinal Mercier)*

**Prayer of humility and abandonment:** *O Lord, I am not of myself capable of having a good thought, but my sufficiency is from You. I am not able to concentrate my thoughts if You do not control them, nor to raise my heart to You, unless You attract it; nor to love You, if You do not inflame me. ... Come, then, O Divine Spirit...I abandon myself to You, in order that, illuminated, moved and guided by You, I may make my meditation well; come, enlighten my intelligence, inflame my heart and convert my will, that my prayer may contribute to Your glory and to my own spiritual advancement. Amen. (Abbot Lehodey)*

**Prayer to Christ:** *O Christ Jesus, full of grace and Model of every virtue, beloved Son in Whom the Father is well-pleased, be the one object of my contemplation and love. May I regard all passing things as dung so as to place my joy in Thee alone; may I seek to imitate Thee so as to be, by Thee and with Thee, pleasing to Thy Father in all things! Amen. (Abbot Marmion)*

**Prayer to the Trinity:** *O my God, Trinity whom I adore, help me to forget myself entirely, and establish me in You, calm and quiet as though my soul were already in eternity; that nothing might disturb my peace or cause me to leave You, my Unchanging Good, but that every moment You draw me ever deeper into the depths of Your mystery. Quiet my soul, make it Your heaven, Your favorite dwelling, and Your resting place; may I never leave You alone, but be wholly present, entirely vigilant in my faith, wholly adoring, wholly abandoned to Your creative action. Amen. (St. Elizabeth of the Trinity)*





## Sources:

- <sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 27
- <sup>2</sup> *The Life of Teresa of Jesus*, St. Teresa, 85
- <sup>3</sup> *Praying Scripture for a Change: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*, Tim Gray, 96
- <sup>4</sup> *Address to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Dei Verbum*, 9/16/05
- <sup>5</sup> *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI, #86
- <sup>6</sup> *Prayer*, Hans Urs Von Balthazar, 77
- <sup>7</sup> CCC2672
- <sup>8</sup> *A School of Prayer*, Pope Benedict XVI, 216
- <sup>9</sup> CCC2672
- <sup>10</sup> *Verbum*, 86
- <sup>11</sup> *Guigo II: Ladder of Monks and Twelve Meditations*, tr. James Walsh, 67-68
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 68-69
- <sup>13</sup> *Verbum*, #87
- <sup>14</sup> *Into the Deep*, Dan Burke, 47; great resource as author and at Avila Institute
- <sup>15</sup> *Verbum*, #87
- <sup>16</sup> *Introduction to the Devout Life*, St. Francis de Sales, 95
- <sup>17</sup> *Divine Intimacy*, Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen, 149
- <sup>18</sup> *Foundations in Prayer in Union with God*, Avila Institute
- <sup>19</sup> *Lectio Divina and the Practice of Teresian Prayer*, Fr. Sam A. Morello, 9-10
- <sup>20</sup> *Verbum*, #87
- <sup>21</sup> *Treatise on the Love of God*, St. Francis de Sales, 249
- <sup>22</sup> *Verbum*, #87
- <sup>23</sup> *Praying*, 93
- <sup>24</sup> *Lectio Divina*, Morello, 12
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, 26
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, 23
- <sup>27</sup> *Guigo*, 74-75

## Suggested reading, in addition to what is found in the Sources above:

- *Elizabeth of the Trinity: A Life of Praise to God*, Sr. Giovanna Della Croce
- *Navigating the Interior Life: Spiritual Direction and the Journey to God; Finding God Through Meditation: St. Peter of Alcantara*, Dan Burke
- *The Way of Trust and Love: A Retreat Guided by St. Therese of Lisieux; Time for God; Thirsting for Prayer*, Fr. Jacques Philippe
- *Story of a Soul*, St. Therese of Lisieux
- *John of Avila: Audi, Filio—Listen O Daughter*, tr. Joan Frances Gormley
- *Union with God: According to St. John of the Cross; The Way of Prayer: A Commentary of St. Teresa's Way of Perfection*, Fr. Gabriel of St. Mary Magdalen
- *Prayer Primer: Igniting a Fire Within; Fire Within: St. Teresa of Avila, St. John of the Cross, and the Gospel on Prayer*, Fr. Thomas Dubay
- *Into Your Hands, Father; The Holy Spirit, Fire of Divine Love*, Fr. Wilfrid Stinissen
- *A Devotional Journey into the Mass*, Chris Carstens
- *Five Pillars of the Spiritual Life*, Fr. Robert Spitzer
- *The Soul of the Apostolate*, Abbot Jean-Baptist Chautard
- *The Power of Silence*, Cardinal Sarah
- *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, Fr. Jean-Pierre de Caussade
- *The Wellspring of Worship*, Fr. Jean Corbon
- *Fire From Above: Christian Contemplation and Mystical Wisdom*, Anthony Lilles





