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THE GOD OF
Intimacy
AND ACTION

Reconnecting Ancient Spiritual Practices,
Evangelism, and Justice

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prompting us to live and love through our holy reading of the scriptures. As we listen, we learn to recognize Jesus' voice, instead of false voices, and thereby discern what is and is not of God (see John 10:5). We then respond to Jesus, since the Hebrew word for *listen* comes from the word *obey*. In John 15:14, Jesus says, "You are my friends if you do what I command you." What does Jesus command? That we love God and others—these are the two greatest commandments. To learn to obey these commandments we need to listen to Jesus through deepening our interaction with scripture.

Lectio divina, or simply *lectio*, as a spiritual practice is one of the best ways we can learn to listen and thereby develop a deep and dynamically intimate friendship with Jesus and with those whom Jesus loves. Through *lectio* our eyes are opened to seeing the sacredness of others. We see Jesus in "the least of these," as he says in Matthew 25—the hungry, the thirsty, and those sick and in prison. Then we respond by sharing God's love through evangelizing and by working for justice for everyone, for that is what friendship with Jesus is about.

Listening to God Through *Lectio Divina*

Although many of us have grown up hearing how important it is to read the Bible, fewer of us know of the type of meditative and reflective reading called *lectio divina*. We know that we are to "get into the scriptures," but it is even more important that we allow the scriptures to get into us, and that is *lectio divina*. The difference is in *how* we read the Bible.

Lectio divina is much more than reading—it is the act of "praying the scriptures." In *lectio divina*, you combine reading with meditation for a deeper understanding of how to imitate Jesus in word and action through your deepening friendship with him. In just one time of *lectio* you can experience the friendship and love of Jesus in ways you never knew possible.

Lectio in its truest, broadest sense has three parts (with accompanying Latin names): hearing (*lectio*), reflecting (*meditatio*), and responding (*oratio*). It implies a dynamic interplay among God, the reader, and the text. And since the Bible is the living word of God, this holy, meditative reading of scripture is all about relationships.

Before we go any further, it is important to define what we mean by "meditative" reading. The word *meditation* has different connotations, which often lead to confusion. With some New Agers, meditation is a form of silence with the purpose of emptying the mind. But the word also

is commonly used as a generic term for methods of deep breathing and relaxation for, among other things, stress reduction. Describing meditation is like trying to explain postmodernism or evangelicalism—you could ask several different people their definitions and hear just as many different answers.

Biblically, the word *meditate* or *meditation* refers to reflecting on the scriptures and commands of God. It is not a state of inactivity or emptiness; instead it is a mindful, “heartful” reflecting on and pondering of a biblical text. It is the kind of reflecting that Psalm 1 refers

to when it says blessed is the one whose “delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night.” Here is a sampling of the many verses in scripture that illustrate how meditation refers to this kind of active reflecting for “getting the scriptures into us.”

“I treasure your word in my heart, so that I may not sin against you.” (Psalm 119:11)

“I will meditate on your precepts, and fix my eyes on your ways.” (Psalm 119:15)

“I revere your commandments, which I love, and I will meditate on your statutes.” (Psalm 119:48)

“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” (Psalm 119:105)

“Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs to God.” (Colossians 3:16)

The Biggest Lie in Christianity?

When we meditate on scripture, we do more than informational and instructional reflection, because although that kind of Bible study is necessary, it is not sufficient. As Jesus said in John 5:39–40, “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life.”

You know that you are to “get into the scriptures,” but it is even more important that you allow the scriptures to get into you.

With any type of relationship, there is a world of difference between studying about what makes for a good relationship and actually experiencing one. For instance, we can talk about falling in love, but if it happens to us, our words do not begin to describe the experience. Meditating on scripture creates opportunities for us to come to Jesus in more intimate, mystical ways than ordinary study ever could. Perhaps the biggest lie in Christianity is that we can in fact be Christian without developing that kind of intimacy with Christ. *But we cannot.* As Thomas Merton wrote:

The Christian is then not simply a man of goodwill, who commits himself to a certain set of beliefs, who has a definite dogmatic conception of the universe, of man, and of man's reason for existing. He is not simply one who follows a moral code of brotherhood and benevolence with strong emphasis on certain rewards and punishments dealt out to the individual. Underlying Christianity is not simply a set of doctrines about God. . . . On the contrary Christians themselves too often fail to realize that the infinite God is dwelling within them, so that He is in them and they are in Him. They remain unaware of the presence of the Infinite Source of Being right in the midst of the world and of men.²

For Merton, the kind of wisdom that comes from *lectio divina* is a "living contact with the Infinite Source of all being, a contact not only of minds and hearts . . . but a transcendent union of consciousness in which man and God become, according to the expression of St. Paul, 'one spirit.'"³

In *lectio* we are invited again and again into a kind of aliveness and empowerment in the Spirit that study alone cannot produce. Since reading

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scriptures *only* in analytical ways quenches the Holy Spirit's flame, in the Middle Ages *lectio* became an antidote to the preoccupation with study, analysis, and rational theological thought. Without disparaging scholarship, *lectio divina* adds something crucial to our relationship with God. For instance, when reading a passage of scripture on humility, such as Philippians 2:1-11, during *lectio* we are not so much concerned with analyzing what Paul meant as we are with what God can say to us

as we silently meditate and let the Holy Spirit control our reflection. John 15:26 tells us, "When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who comes from the Father, he will testify on my behalf." This is what happens in *lectio divina*.

When we read the Bible for study only, as Merton said, our Christianity can become too much about a set of beliefs and not enough about the kind of intimacy that leads to real transformation in our lives and in the world. If we know that Christianity is a relationship much more than a religion, why do we often live as if the opposite were true? Many of us continue to live with our system of beliefs *about* Jesus instead of living *with* Jesus. The terrible truth is that we may be blind to the difference. Yet as Jesus said in John 5:39–40, even though we may adhere to a system of beliefs from the scriptures, if we do not *come to him*, we do not have eternal life. Coming to Jesus means having a relationship with Jesus, surrendering to an intimate connection with him, so that Jesus can do his work in the world through us. *Lectio divina* helps us avoid treating the Bible as a rule book that replaces the Holy Spirit who speaks to us in the here and now as we meditate on scripture.

When we surrender to the Spirit during *lectio divina*, we get meanings specifically personal and relevant that build our friendship with God. That is why the same passage of scripture can speak to us in different ways when we read it at different times. As Basil Pennington wrote in his book *Lectio Divina*, "We come to lectio not so much seeking ideas, concepts, insights, or even motivating graces; we come to lectio seeking God himself and nothing less than God."⁴

Preparing for *Lectio Divina*

It is important to plan an intentional amount of time per day for lectio. It can be done in as little as a few minutes, although I recommend a minimum of 10 to 15 minutes a day. Since the purpose is to get the word of God into us, the more time we can spend doing it, the better. It is also best to find a quiet space so as to concentrate more fully on what the Holy Spirit wants to say to and through us.

It is a good idea to choose and read a passage the day or night before you plan to have a lectio session so that you can begin to have it in your mind and heart. Another reason to choose the exact text ahead of time is to resist the temptation to use time and energy reserved for Jesus to pick "just the right passage." The first time I did an extended form of lectio was during a five-day retreat. Father Bernie, my retreat director, gave me three passages from which to choose. He then gave me what I found to