

PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF LECTIO DIVINA FOR CARMELITES

Chris Hart, OCDS and Theresa Thomas, OCDS

Lectio divina is Latin for “Divine reading”. It is a way of steeping ourselves in the experiential knowledge of God by engaging in conversation with the One who we know loves us. Using God’s own words in the Bible, we gradually learn to meditate day and night on the law of the Lord in order to center our life in allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Lectio has roots in ancient monastic tradition, which was highly regulated and very structured. As practiced in the Middle Ages, *lectio divina* included at least four steps: *lectio*, or reading; *meditatio*, or meditation; *oratio*, or prayer; and *contemplatio*, contemplation. It was often compared to eating: In reading, we put food into our mouths; in meditation, we chew on it; in prayer we swallow it; and in contemplation we taste its fullness. Thus the Eucharist remains alive throughout the day through *lectio*.

As Carmelites we seek a free, intimate relationship with God in contemplation. Yet the *Rule of St. Albert*, our *OCDS Constitutions* and Provincial Statutes call us to immersion in the Word of God through *lectio divina*. It is a paradox that such a highly structured, sometimes apparently rigid approach can lead us to the freedom that we seek in contemplation. So how does the Rule of St. Albert lead us to *lectio divina*? What exactly is *lectio divina* anyway, and how do we practice it?

The Rule of St. Albert is noteworthy for the way in which it relies on Sacred Scripture. St. Albert had internalized scripture so completely that the words of the Bible became the words he automatically used to express his own thoughts. The *Rule* is rife with allusions to Biblical passages, without any explicit reference to them. It reflects the familiarity and freedom that can only come from many years of faithful encounter with the Word in Sacred Scripture.

With such a background, it should come as no surprise that Albert would make use of immersion in Sacred Scripture to form a life pure in heart, steadfast in conscience, and

unswerving in the service of Christ. Immersion in the Word is particularly suited to the formation of contemplatives. He enjoins us to listen to a reading from Holy Scripture during meals; to ponder the law of the Lord day and night; to keep watch at prayer; and to pray the psalms in the Liturgy of the Hours. He instructs us to gather each morning to hear the Word in Mass and urges us to be fortified by holy meditations. The Word must abound in our mouths and in our hearts, thus letting the Lord's word accompany all we do. As example for this he gives us St. Paul, "into whose mouth Christ put his own words." (Rule of St. Albert [20]) All of these injunctions are ways of bringing *lectio's* encounter with the Word into our daily lives.

The purpose of *lectio divina*, as previously stated, is to bring about this profound familiarity with the Word of God so that His thoughts become our thoughts and His ways become our ways. Through *lectio*, we train ourselves to listen to what God has to say to us in the concrete circumstances of our lives. This is hard for us, because we are more accustomed to reading for information or discussion than to listening for and accepting what God wants to give in our reading. As with the Divine Office, when we engage in *lectio divina*, we are not alone, but in communion with the other members of Christ's body who have chosen to ponder the Lord's law day and night, keeping watch in prayer.

A preparatory step for *lectio* is to put ourselves in God's presence. We ask for the assistance of the Holy Spirit to create the silent space within that is necessary to hear God's Word for us expressed in the chosen scripture passage.

The first step then is to read the passage slowly and attentively, sitting with it in silence for a moment or two before asking, what does the text say *as text*? Here it is important to pay close attention to the words so that we do not interpret the text to say what we want it to say instead of what it actually says. Interior silence will enable us to retell the story accurately in our own words. This is the step that corresponds to putting the food into our mouths. We hold it in silence for a moment or two before reading the text a second time, again slowly and attentively.

In the second step, after stilling ourselves, we ask what does the text say *to me and to our world* today? Thus begins the meditation, the chewing, of the text. In this step it is important to search each part of the text until all the questions have surfaced that might help us understand what God is saying through the selected passage. In this way, we imitate Our Lady who pondered God's words to her in her heart. In our questions, we assume Mary's trusting attitude of faith, not challenging, but seeking God's truth.

This will lead naturally to the third step, *oratio*, the swallowing of the Word in prayer. In swallowing, we ingest something so that it can become an integral part of us. We might again read the text slowly and attentively, focused now on our deeper understanding of what God has said to us. Now we ask, how do I respond to what God has said? After answering that question, we make our response. This is St. Teresa's intimate conversation with the One who we know loves us. Our response may take the form of more reflection or further searching, which can lead to a commitment. It is easy to understand why it is swallowing the Word.

Having swallowed, we may enter the fourth step of *lectio*, tasting the fullness of God's word in contemplation. Even if God does not choose to grant the fullness of infused contemplation, after having absorbed God's word in prayer, we cannot fail to experience the joy, peace and tranquility of living in accord with his will. With faithful practice, like St. Albert, we will internalize God's words so completely that His word will abound in our mouths and in our hearts, and we will taste His fullness in contemplation.

The authors gratefully acknowledge the Carmelite Institute's program of January, 2006, "Handing on Our Tradition: Formation of Formators", and the contribution in it of Carlos Mesters, O. Carm., from whose article "Meditating Day and Night: Keeping Vigil in Prayer (reproduced at <http://www.carmelite.org/mesters/mesters5.htm>) we drew heavily.

