

Below are Fr. Michael's reflections on this practice and how it is practiced at Gethsemani.

+LENTEN READING, *the Practice and Gethsemani*

Every year on the first Sunday of Lent, each member of the Gethsemani community

receives a book at the end of the morning Chapter, that he is to use as his Lenten reading. A couple weeks before this day the Abbot will announce that each of us should select a book for Lenten reading and put it at his office door. This gives him a chance to be sure it is appropriate and if nothing has been given him, he himself will pick a book for the brother as Lenten reading. A few prefer the abbot to pick something for them. These are placed in various piles around the Chapter room and a few designated brothers distribute them when asked to do so. There is the old custom of bowing to the person who gives you your Lenten book as a sacred gift.

Regards the practice, it is brought up in the Rule where Benedict gives a chapter on the Daily Manual Labor. St Benedict is obviously putting it into this context to remind the monk that it is important for him to maintain a balance between prayer (public and private) manual labor and lectio divina. In Lent Benedict allows extra time in the morning for the monks to read. He knows well the power of the Word to change our lives, to aid the ongoing conversion that is given extra emphasis during this season. To designate a book as "to be read the whole of it straight through" is saying more than we may first realize. It is to move us into a sense of the sacredness of the reading that will expose us to the Word of God whom we will meet in the reading. We are not to jump around at whim but read it straight through so that we are being the ones who are being read as much as doing the reading. Effective lectio divina is where the word comes off the page and reveals us in the eyes of God, enabling us to take a close look at the values we hold or aspire to and how we are living them. Before beginning to read there is the custom of saying a prayer so as to be disposed to this presence of God's Word.

Designating a time for this each day gets us to stop our normal routines and being in control of our lives. It gives us the time to sit and reflect, to let a sacred book inspire us in such a way that we personally taste more of Christ the living Word of God. Lectio early on was done mostly with the Scriptures as texts. In fact, Benedict's community had few books to start with, mostly being various books of the Scriptures or commentaries on them. So any book we choose today should have content that comes out an in depth experience of the Scriptures, something that will challenge us like the Scriptures themselves will do. A favorite Lenten book early on around Gethsemani was the Life of Christ by Romano Guardini, the ideal was to give us a fresh look at the living Word of God.

Let me add one further thought about Lenten reading in regards to our practice at Gethsemani. As a community we do this of an evening, every evening except on Sunday when one is free to do as one likes. The other days, the Lenten reading begins at 6:45 of an evening and lasts until 7:25 when we head off for Compline. If one likes, he may stop the reading at 7:15 and go pray with it until Compline time. Most stay with the reading until Compline. How one does the reading is again up to the individual, we are free to stop and reflect anywhere along the line or just pray where one is seated as the Spirit moves. The time honor "technique" of Lectio is the reading, meditating, prayer

and contemplation. The most valuable way of doing it is to allow any combination of the four aspects as the Spirit leads one.