

Lectio Divina – by Fr. James Conner

(Talk given to Lay Cistercians at the June 2023 retreat at the Abbey of Gethsemani)

The subject for today is **Lectio Divina – Sacred Reading**. This has been seen traditionally as a very important element in the life of the monk – and consequently should be important for the Lay Cistercian. It is seen as second only to prayer itself. In actual fact, it is an element of prayer.

Reading nourishes our mind and our heart in order to lead us into prayer. When I was a novice, the practice was that before reading, we would first kneel at our place and make a short prayer, asking the Holy Spirit that what we read may be a source toward greater understanding and love of God.

The primary source for monastic reading has always been the Sacred Scriptures – the Word of God. In it, we hear the very voice of God, revealing Himself to us, in the great acts of the Old Testament and in the saving action of the Son of God in the New Testament.

Naturally for monks, an important part of the Scriptures is the Book of Psalms. This is a major part of our monastic choral prayer. But reading and reflecting on various psalms can be an important part of our life of prayer. The purpose is not simply to cover ground. It may be that a single verse or two may trigger a deeper awareness of God and His Love for us in His beloved Son.

But beyond Scripture, one may find God in other sources as well. Obviously, the Commentaries on Scripture hold high place. Then the works of the Fathers of the Church, the early monks of the Desert, the Sermons of our Cistercian Fathers and Mothers, and the writings of the mystics of later age. St. Benedict gives a good list in chapter 73 of the Holy Rule. He tells us that these authors are essential for the monk.

Poetry can also be a source of reflection and contemplation. It is a poet who tells us that “only God can make a tree”. The poet is striving to convey something more than the simple words can convey. It is for us to be open to what the Spirit may be trying to convey through these words. In this way, basically any type of reading can open our minds and hearts to discover the presence of the living God and to hear the word that the Spirit silently speaks.

Of course, other forms of reading can also be an open door to God. Science shows us the wonders of God’s creation. Current events can be

seen in the light of what both the Spirit and the Evil one is doing in the world of today. Psychology can help us to understand both our selves and one another better, and hence be better prepared to love one another, even in our mutual strangeness. In this light, certain novels can be very beneficial in allowing us to grasp many different temperaments and their interplay both for good and for evil,

Medicine can show us the complexity of our very bodies, made in the image and likeness of God; and also, the power God has placed within the elements of creation which can serve for healing. And the current events can show us both the wisdom and the foolishness of humans.

Beyond this, nature itself can be an open door to discovering God and His Love. St. Bernard has a beautiful thought in one of his sermons (unfortunately, I don't know which) in which he says: *"You will discover things in the woods that you never found in books. Stones and trees will teach you things that you never heard from your schoolteachers."* (that quote is found posted on the bulletin board next to the elevator.)

But all of this is to lead us ultimately to prayer – to finding and relishing the God Who is speaking to us in all of these various ways. It can reveal much to us both about ourselves and about one another. In this way our reading can open us to a fuller and more honest contact with one another. And in that very contact we can discover the full meaning of what Jesus called "my new commandment" – namely to love one another.

The monk and the Lay Cistercian are called to this life and to these elements of daily life precisely as a way to "prefer nothing to the Love of Christ". In it we discover that Lectio Divina does not exclude our interest in any field of endeavor. Rather it directs all that we do, all that we think and read, all that we say and do, to that love of Christ which alone gives purpose and meaning to our commitment to this way of life.

"Lectio Divina" or "Sacred Reading" is to become an attitude with which we are led to approach all things, all situations and all people. In every case, it is a call to love as Christ loves. He was known as the son of a carpenter before He was known as a healer, a prophet or the Messiah. That is, in itself, the beauty of the life of the Lay Cistercian. He or she is not known as someone special. Rather, you are known simply as the person I work with or the people next door. Yet within the heart of that unknown person rests that very Holy Spirit to whom we strive to be open at all times and all circumstances.

The wisdom that we seek in any type of reading cannot compare with that wisdom bestowed only by the Holy Spirit. It is there that we are to seek and to find true wisdom which can enrich our own lives and the lives of those around us.

May that Spirit come to each of you and to your families and homes and places of work, that all that you speak or do can be a reflection of that very wisdom of God that Jesus Christ has come to give us. In this way we will truly “prefer nothing to the Love of Christ”.