

# Lectio Divina



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This is an ancient form of prayer in the church using Sacred Scripture. *Lectio Divina* involves certain basic steps. *Lectio* (Reading), *Meditatio* (Meditation), *Oratio* (Prayer), and *Contemplatio* (Contemplation). Apart from the *Lectio Divina*, there existed in the Church many different forms of prayer all of which are based on the inspiration of Sacred Scripture or on exhortations found therein, such as indicated here-below.

## 1. Jesus and Prayer



A in-depth analysis of the Matthean gospel shows that Jesus prayed (Mt. 14:23; 26:36-39). After dismissing the crowds, he would go up the mountain by himself to pray. Jesus would pray over others who were brought to him, especially children (Mt. 19:13). He also commanded his disciples to pray for themselves (Mt. 6:5-7; 21:22; 24:20; 26:41), and for their enemies (Mt. 5:44). He asked his disciples to pray that they may be granted collaborators for mission (Mt. 9:38).

Both Matthew and Luke recount that Jesus also taught his disciples how to pray (Mt. 6:10-13; Lk. 11: 2-4). The prayer of Jesus, commonly known as the Lord's Prayer is therefore, the prayer *par excellence* and the model of all Christian prayer. Apart from this, Jesus insisted on the necessity of asking God for our daily needs (cf. Parable of the Unjust Judge – Lk. 18:1-8; Parable of the Visitor at Midnight – Lk. 11:5-8). That Prayer is based upon the believer's trust in God's providence is reflected in Lk. 11: 9-13,

“And I tell you, Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. What father among you, if his son asks for a fish, will instead of a fish give him a serpent; or if he asks for an egg, will give him a scorpion? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!”

Jesus himself made a distinction between true worshippers and false worshippers. In Jn. 4:23 he says, “But the hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him.” Further, Matthew records twice Jesus' quote of the OT text ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice’ (Mt. 9:13;

12:7), thus highlighting the necessity of reforming and renewing not only existing forms of worship, but also the basic concept of worship. Already Isa. 1:11-18 pointed to the link between worship and lifestyle.

“What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices? says the Lord; I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of he-goats. ‘When you come to appear before me, who requires of you this trampling of my courts? Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and Sabbath and the calling of assemblies -- I cannot endure iniquity and solemn assembly. Your new moons and your appointed feasts my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them. When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen; your hands are full of blood. Wash you, make you clean; put away the evil of your doings from before mine eyes; cease to do evil; learn to do well; seek justice, relieve the oppressed, judge the fatherless, plead for the widow.”

Jesus will insist that authenticity of prayer is reflected in lifestyle. Inconsistency and lack of congruence (harmony) between prayer and lifestyle renders prayer mere pantomime or pretence. Hence in the Lord’s Prayer the primary aim is to harmonize lifestyle with the Divine Will (Mt. 6:10). Luke (11:2-4) does not refer to God’s will being done on earth, although it is implied in the wish that God’s Kingdom come on this earth because Kingdom implies dominion. All other petitions in the Lord’s Prayer, especially earthly needs, are placed on a secondary level (cf. daily bread).

St. Paul too, makes references to prayer (1 Thess. 5:17; 1 Tim. 2:1). Scripture also contains references both in the OT and NT of man’s incapability of praying as he ought to (cf. Isa. 1:11; Rom. 8:26). While there are also instances that apparently present prayer as being superfluous and unnecessary (cf. Mt. 6:7-8; 6:26, 30-33; 7:11). This has prompted the earliest Christian writers on prayer such as Origen to discuss the necessity of prayer.



## 2. Church Fathers and Prayer

Quintus Septimus Florens Tertullian born in Carthage, Africa (ca 160 AD), was the first Latin writer who wrote a teaching document on prayer. Tertullian considered the Lord’s Prayer as ‘the epitome of the whole gospel.’ Tertullian’s perspective of prayer is based on the conviction that as we pray, we become part of the outcome prayed for. For instance, as we pray the Lord’s Prayer, we ask that God’s name be hallowed in us, and that God’s will be accomplished in us, and that God’ kingdom be realized in us. For Tertullian the request for ‘*epiousios* (daily) bread’ was not only practical but also spiritual. In it we ask for Christ, who is our spiritual bread (Jn. 6:35). ‘The bread’ prayed for ‘is the word of the God who has come down from heaven’ (Jn. 6:31), and Christ’s body is seen in (what appears to be) bread; “This IS my body” (Lk. 22:19). Tertullian reminds us that the man who knocked on his friend’s door in the middle of the night was looking for bread (Lk.

11:5), and that the phrase ‘Give us this day’ in the Lord’s Prayer echoes the scriptural precept ‘Do not be anxious about what you will eat tomorrow’ (Mt. 6: 34).

St. Cyprian of Carthage was the second Latin writer to discuss the theme of prayer. He wrote on prayer using the Lord’s Prayer as his model. He described the one who is baptized as the ‘new man’ who says ‘Father’ first of all. Cyprian encouraged daily prayer as a means of sanctification. He urged the use of Scripture in prayer: ‘Be constant in prayer as in reading; now speak to God; now let God speak to you.’ Thus, St. Cyprian formulated one of the first directives of spiritual reading of scripture and described a unity of prayer and scripture reading which began to be cherished by Christians from then on. It marked the evolution of a new form of prayer, spanning several centuries. Christian prayer had its roots in the Lord’s Prayer, and in the prayer of Jesus himself. It was a characteristic of the way of life that distinguished the Early Christian Community (Acts 2:42). For Cyprian, the man made new in baptism seeks his Father, God, through the precepts of the Our Father. He expects our greatest desire, expressed in prayer, to be for God. We pray daily to be holy.

Origen was by far the most important of Greek writers to comment first on prayer. Origen starts by assuming that we do not know how to pray (Rom. 8:26). He maintained that to pray as we ought to, we must know what to pray for. He says scripture illustrates what to pray for or whom to pray for (Mt. 5:23-24; 9:38; Lk. 6:28; 22:40). Hence, Origen considers that prayer takes different forms in different circumstances. Origen sees the imperative to pray ‘constantly’ (1 Thess. 5:17) fulfilled by acts of virtue, and that the distinction made between supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgiving (1 Tim. 2:1) point to different parts in the process of prayer. Commenting on the Lord’s Prayer, Origen says hallowing God’s name is the goal of all worship (Ps. 45:17). Origen teaches that God’s kingdom is within us. We pray that God’s will be done on earth because by committing ourselves to Christ, we become one with him. Citing Jn. 6:26, 27, 51, 53-57, Origen denies an earthly sense to the supplication ‘Give us today our daily bread’ and concludes that the petition refers to the desire for Christ’s presence in our lives.

We conclude that from earliest times the purpose of prayer was to do God’s will in one’s life.

### 3. Towards a Definition of Prayer



Definitions of prayer began to emerge around the 4<sup>th</sup> -5<sup>th</sup> centuries in both the East and the West. Among the Greek Fathers of the East, Cyril of Jerusalem born in Palestine (313 AD) and who would later become bishop of Jerusalem in 348 AD, viewed prayer through a broader perspective and associated it with all Christian life. Cyril said: ‘Prayer is not tied down to a time table, rather it is a state which endures by night and day. Our souls should be directed in God, not merely when we think

of prayer, but even when we think of something else.’ For Cyril, Prayer includes desire for god and devotion: ‘You should not think of prayer as being a matter of words, it is a desire for God, an indescribable devotion, not of human origin, but the gift of God’s grace.’

Gregory of Nyssa, one of the trio of the mystical theologians from Cappadocia in the mid 4<sup>th</sup> century (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa) says this about prayer: ‘It is intimacy with God, and contemplation of the invisible. It satisfies our yearnings and makes us equal to the angels. Through it good prospers, evil is destroyed, and sinners will be converted. Prayer is the enjoyment of things present and the substance of things to come.’

For St. Augustine of Hippo (ca. 354-430 AD) Jesus prays in us as we pray: ‘He prays for us as our priest, prays in us as our Head, and is prayed to by us as our God. Therefore, let us acknowledge his voice in him and his in us.’

Prosper of Aquitaine (ca. 390-463 AD) highlighted the necessary unity between prayer and belief: ‘The law of prayer determines the law of belief.’ (*Ut legem credendi lex statat supplicandi* or *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*). From this latin quote emerged the abbreviated form ‘*lex orandi lex credendi*’ (The law of prayer equates to the law of belief).

St. Thérèse of Lisieux says of prayer: “For me prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned towards heaven, it is a cry of recognition and love, embracing both trial and joy.”

*The Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines prayer thus: ‘Prayer is the raising up of the mind and heart to God’ (cf. Para 2559 of CCC). This is a synopsis of St. John Damascene’s description of prayer: “Prayer is the raising up of one’s mind and heart to God, or the requesting of good things from God.” This is a starting point in understanding the nature and purpose of prayer.

#### **4. *Lectio Divina***

Prayer takes on various forms. Mental prayer, verbal prayer and contemplative prayer are ways of describing the process by which one engages in prayer. Prayer may also be classified according to its purpose: praise, thanksgiving, reparation and supplication. Monasteries were places where Christian meditation techniques developed. It was here that the first directives of spiritual reading of scripture formulated by St. Cyprian, developed and flourished. Scriptural texts were read and reflected upon by monks in the Egyptian desert. St. John Chrysostom (d. 407) encouraged monks of Constantinople in similar patterns of reading and meditation. John Cassian (d. 435) brought the eastern monastic tradition to the west urging the use of sacred scripture in prayer. St. Benedict (d. 550) who wrote the first great rule for monastic life included therein a commendation of meditation/reflection on scriptures while also commending the writings of Cassian. St.

Jerome considered a knowledge of scripture essential for prayer: ‘Ignorance of scripture is ignorance of Christ.’ St. Isidore of Seville (d. 630) following Cyprian’s idea promoted the reading of scripture in prayer. For Isidore, when we pray we talk to God; when we read scripture, God talks to us.

In the Scholastic era, Guigo II, the ninth prior of the motherhouse of the Carthusian Order (The Grand Chartreuse), popularized techniques of scripture-prayer through his publication “*Ladder of Monks*” (d. 1180). Bernard of Clairvaux (d. 1153) and William of St. Thierry (d. 1148) were others who contributed to the growth of scripture-prayer techniques in monasteries, as a life changing power.

Guigo II introducing the “*Ladder of Monks*” says: ‘One day when I was busy working with my hands I began to think about spiritual work, and all at once four stages of spiritual exercise came into my mind: reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation. These make up a ladder for monks to lift them up from earth to heaven ... Reading is the careful study of the scriptures, concentrating all one’s powers on it. Meditation is the busy application of the mind to seek with the help of one’s own reason for knowledge of hidden truth. Prayer is the hearts devoted turning to God to drive away evil and obtain what is good. Contemplation is when the mind is in some sort lifted up to God and held above itself, so that it tastes the joys of everlasting sweetness ... Reading without meditation is sterile, meditation without reading is liable to error, prayer without meditation is lukewarm, meditation without prayer is unfruitful, prayer when it is fervent wins contemplation, but to obtain it without prayer would be rare, even miraculous.’ Guigo’s work is considered a starting point for *Lectio Divina*, and today a fifth rung is usually advocated. The fifth rung is *action*, ‘Christian action.’ Guigo II stands within the tradition that considers prayer an ‘ascent.’ The sense that ‘god is in heaven’ and that ‘heaven is above’ has led Guigo II and many others to define prayer as moving upwards. Commenting further on the spiritual journey along the rungs of the ladder, Guigo II says, ‘The first degree is proper to beginners, the second to proficients, the third o devotees, the fourth to the blessed.’ Guigo II considers spiritual life as a journey, where at its different stages, different activities or elements will be prevalent.

In early monastic usage, meditation was viewed as ‘repeating or ruminating on the Word of God.’ Augustine says, ‘When you read or listen you eat: when you meditate you come to understand what you read or hear: you ruminate like an animal.’

For the first five hundred years of Christian tradition, scriptures were always read aloud. So, meditation was noisy. Later silent reading became the norm, and meditation was in silence. In the middle ages, St. Anselm began introducing the use of reason as part of meditation, which practice was propagated by Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141), and followed by Guigo II.



## 5. Conclusion

Prayer is not so much an activity as a state. To be in a state of continued prayer, it is not necessary to recite an unending series of prayers. St. Basil the Great has said, 'We should not express our prayer merely in syllables, but the power of prayer should be expressed in the moral attitude of our soul and in the virtuous actions that extend through out our life ... This is how you pray continually – not by offering prayer in words, but in joining yourself to God through your whole way of life, so that your life becomes one continuous and uninterrupted prayer.' This state of prayer is not just the culmination of a lifetime of saying prayers but the natural outcome of a whole way of life dedicated to openness, to grace, to faith in the divine presence, and the working of providence in our lives. The key to prayer then, is the quality of daily life.

Prayer is not just a part of a Christian's life; it is the structure of a Christian's life, and after a lifetime, it becomes the very structure of his being. Prayer is not an activity that is added to other activities; it is the condition of being from which all actions spring.

No doubt, prayer is a part of life because man is a religious being who belongs to another order, and in whom something of eternity exists in that we have been endowed with a capacity for God. This capacity to know and love God has been endowed to us by being created in the *image and likeness of God*. Therefore, we pray as those who have been found by God. For it is the Holy Spirit who intercedes in us (Rom. 8:26 - Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words). Prayer is God's gift to us. Therefore, the most important thing is that we give time to prayer. Prayer is an offering of time. It is time given, burnt in an oblation.

St. John Climacus has said, 'Prayer is by nature a dialogue between man and God. It unites the soul with its Creator and reconciles the two. Its effect is to hold the world together.'

St. Cyril of Alexandria has said, 'Prayer is keeping company with God.'

We think prayer is allowing God to keep company with us in a dialogue meant to transform our perspective in accordance with His holy will.

