

Lectio Divina

March 2021, by Adam Marshall-Lopez

Lectio Divina is Latin for “sacred reading.” It is a very old way of reading and meditating on the Bible; and as such, there are a myriad of approaches and origin stories that can be difficult to reconcile. Some sources trace back to Martin Luther while others point to early monastics. Some even draw parallels to the first-century theologian Augustine of Hippo and his account of opening the Bible at random upon hearing the phrase, “Take up and read.”

The purpose of Lectio Divina is to go deep rather than wide. In the context of a pool, it wouldn't be covering every square inch of the 2-foot-deep section; instead it's going as far down as you can in 12 square inches of the 10-foot-deep section. Instead of reading an entire book of the Bible, you'll be covering just a few verses. The purpose of Lectio Divina is not just to get through it, but instead to be especially attentive in a particular way. Here are some guidelines and tips.

Choose your passage. You want to choose a short passage, only 4-6 verses in length. Try for no more than 10. You should not get bogged down in the length of your passage as you read/listen to it. Feel free to hop around in the Bible or follow daily lectionary readings. Once you get a feel for it, you may choose to work through an entire chapter or book of the Bible bit by bit using Lectio Divina.

Choose your medium. My own experience with Lectio Divina has been most life-giving when *listening* to the passage. You may listen to your passage online, you may want to record yourself reading the passage aloud, or you may want to read the passage yourself. You should also use whatever English translation resonates with you – NKJV, NRSV, CEB, NIV, etc.

Engage the Practice. You should aim to spend 3-5 minutes on each step, sitting with the text and listening to what bubbles up inside you. Set a timer if you need to. You will want to start by sitting quietly and taking several long, deep breaths (as it activates the parasympathetic nervous system and naturally calms your body). Read/Listen/Engage the text at the beginning of each phase, and pay attention to what stirs inside of you.

- (1) Listen for a word or phrase that stands out to you.
- (2) Listen for any meaning that comes to you.
- (3) Listen for what you might want to say back to God.
- (4) Listen for any change or action you may be called to.

Each phase may not draw your attention to the same portion of the text, and that's ok. Allow your mind to focus on whatever portion of the text becomes highlighted for you. After the last phase, you may want to sit quietly for a minute, or you may want to offer a short prayer of gratitude for the experience with that text.

Try options and expansions. Once you have tried Lectio Divina a few times, you may find that it resonates with you on some level ... but not quite fully enough. You may want to try paying attention to music or nature, as Theresa Blythe outlines in her book *50 Ways to Pray*. You may want to try this practice with secular or interreligious friends using movies, fiction, or other media as Casper Ter Kule suggests in his book *The Power of Ritual*. Spirituality comes not only in attentiveness to sacred text, but also in attentiveness to the way God's Spirit moves through every aspect of daily life.