

The Power of Praying Scripture: *Lectio Divina* and Your Spiritual Life

Christ Lives in His Body

[Christ] enables us as the members of his Body to share in what he lived for us in the flesh as our model: "We must continue to accomplish in ourselves the stages of Jesus' life and his mysteries..." (CCC 521)

The Mystery of Jesus' Prayer Life

1. Jesus' Prayer and His Humanity
 - a. Jesus "learned to pray according to his human heart" (CCC 2599)
 - b. Jesus learned to pray from his mother Mary (CCC 2599)
 - c. Jesus learned the prayers of the Jewish people, especially the Psalms (CCC 2599)
2. Jesus' Prayer Life and Habits
 - a. Jesus prayed before "decisive moments" in his life (Luke 6:12)
 - b. Jesus prayed in solitude, preferably at night (Mark 1:35; 6:46)
 - c. Jesus' prayers were marked by thanksgiving (John 11:41-42; Matt 11:25-27)
3. Jesus Ended His Life in Prayer: High Priestly Prayer and Words from Cross (John 17; Matt 27)

The *Catechism* on the Life of Prayer

1. Importance: "One must have the will to pray" and "One must *learn* how to pray" (CCC 2650)
2. The Life of Prayer: we cannot pray at all times unless we pray at *specific* times (CCC 2697-98)
3. Three Major Expressions of Prayer in Tradition (CCC 2699)
 - a. Vocal Prayer—Our Father, Hail Mary, Glory Be, Mass, Liturgy of the Hours (CCC 2700-04)
 - b. *Meditation—the quest to understand the mysteries; to "ponder" them in our heart (CCC 2705-08)
 - c. Contemplation: silent gaze of love, communion with the Holy Trinity (CCC 2709-2719)

Meditation on Scripture (Psalm 1)

Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers;
But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted by streams of water,
That yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.
The wicked are not so, but are like chaff which the wind drives away... (Psalm 1:1-4)

Frequent Meditation on Scripture (Deuteronomy 6)

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD; and you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. *And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise.* And you shall bind them as a sign upon your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. And you shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates." (Deuteronomy 6:4-8)

The Catechism on Praying Scripture

The Church “forcefully and specially exhorts all the Christian faithful... to learn ‘the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ’ by *frequent reading of the divine Scriptures*.... Let them remember, however, that *prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture, so that a dialogue takes place between God and man*. For ‘we speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles.’ The spiritual writers, paraphrasing Matthew 7:7, summarize in this way the dispositions of the heart nourished by the word of God in prayer: “Seek in reading and you will find in meditating; knock in mental prayer and it will be opened to you by contemplation.” (*Catechism* no. 2653-54)¹

Guigo II’s Ladder of Paradise (ca. 1180 A.D.)

One day, while I was busy with the bodily labor of the hands, I began to think about man’s spiritual exercise, and four spiritual steps suddenly presented themselves to my pondering soul: *reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation*. This is *the ladder of cloistered monks whereby they are lifted up from earth into heaven*; although it is divided into only a few steps, its is nonetheless immense and incredible. Its lower part rests on the earth, but its upper part penetrates the clouds and probes the secrets of heaven...

1. Reading: “the diligent examination of Scripture with attentiveness of soul” (Body)
2. Meditation: “the studious action of the mind as it searches out the hidden truth” in Scripture (Mind)
3. Prayer: “the heart’s devout reaching out to God” in response to what has been found (Heart)
4. Contemplation: God raises the soul to himself; man tastes “the joys of eternal sweetness”

Genesis 28: “Jacob’s Ladder/Stairway” and Praying Scripture

And [Jacob] came to a certain place, and stayed there that night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place to sleep. *And he dreamed that there was a ladder [or stairway] set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; and behold, the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And behold, the LORD stood above it and said, "I am the LORD, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac... Behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go..."* Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the LORD is in this place; and I did not know it." And he was afraid, and said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than *the house of God*, and this is *the gate of heaven*." (Genesis 28:10-17)

The LORD (in Heaven)

4. Contemplation

3. Prayer

2. Meditation

1. Reading

Jacob’s (Earth)

(“The House of God, the Gate of Heaven”)

¹ See Guigo II, “Ladder from Earth to Heaven,” translated by Jeremy Holmes in Scott Hahn, ed., *The Authority of Mystery, Letter and Spirit* 2 (2006): 175-188.

1. Lectio Divina and the Problem of Monologue in Prayer

“What is sacred Scripture if not a letter from the omnipotent God to his creature? Certainly if your Excellency resided anywhere else and received a written communication from an earthly emperor, you would not keep still, you would not rest, nor close your eyes in sleep, if you did not know the content of what the earthly emperor had written. *The King of Heaven, the Lord of the human race and of angels has sent his letters to you so that you might live.* Nevertheless... you neglect to read them. *Seek, therefore, I beg you, to meditate every day on the words of your Creator.* Learn the heart of God in the words of God, so that you will long more fervently for eternal things, and so that your mind may be inflamed with greater desire for the joys of heaven.” (Pope St. Gregory the Great, *Letter to Theodore the Physician of the Emperor*)²

As Saint Augustine puts it: “Your prayer is the word you speak to God. *When you read the Bible, God speaks to you; when you pray, you speak to God*”. (Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, no. 86)

2. Pope Benedict on the Rosary and the Bible

Mindful of the inseparable bond between the word of God and Mary of Nazareth, along with the Synod Fathers I urge that *Marian prayer be encouraged among the faithful, above all in the life of families, since it is an aid to meditating on the holy mysteries found in the Scriptures.* A most helpful aid, for example, is the individual or communal recitation of *the Holy Rosary*, which ponders the mysteries of Christ’s life in union with Mary, and which Pope John Paul II wished to enrich with the mysteries of light. *It is fitting that the announcement of each mystery be accompanied by a brief biblical text pertinent to that mystery, so as to encourage the memorization of brief biblical passages relevant to the mysteries of Christ’s life.* (Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, no. 87)

3. Pope Benedict on Family Bible Reading

The great mystery of marriage is the source of the essential responsibility of parents towards their children. *Part of authentic parenthood is to pass on and bear witness to the meaning of life in Christ: through their fidelity and the unity of family life, spouses are the first to proclaim God’s word to their children.* The ecclesial community must support and assist them in fostering family prayer, attentive hearing of the word of God, and knowledge of the Bible. *To this end the Synod urged that every household have its Bible, to be kept in a worthy place and used for reading and prayer.* Whatever help is needed in this regard can be provided by priests, deacons and a well-prepared laity. *The Synod also recommended the formation of small communities of families, where common prayer and meditation on passages of Scripture can be cultivated.* Spouses should also remember that “the Word of God is a precious support amid the difficulties which arise in marriage and in family life” (Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, no. 87)

Practical Suggestions For Praying the Bible

1. Holy Half Hour (30 minutes of Daily Scripture Reading)
2. Meditation on the Daily Scripture Readings (Lectionary, Magnificat)
3. Holy Rosary with Scripture Readings (Scriptural Rosary)
4. Family Bible Time and Prayer

² See Dennis J. Murphy, CSC, *The Church and the Bible: Official Documents of the Catholic Church* (Alba House/St. Pauls, 2007), 17-18.

Conclusion: The Power of Praying Scripture (Ephesians 6)

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil. For we are not contending against flesh and blood, but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness, against the spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places. Therefore take the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having girded your loins with truth, and having put on the breastplate of righteousness, and having shod your feet with the equipment of the gospel of peace; besides all these, taking the shield of faith, with which you can quench all the flaming darts of the evil one. And take the helmet of salvation, and *the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.* (Ephesians 6:10-17)*

Appendix: Pope Benedict and the Indulgence for *Lectio Divina*

I would also like to echo what the Synod proposed about the importance of the personal reading of Scripture, also as a practice allowing for the possibility, in accordance with the Church's usual conditions, of gaining an indulgence either for oneself or for the faithful departed. (Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, no. 86; on indulgences, see *Catechism* nos. 1471-79)

“A *plenary indulgence* is granted to the faithful who read the Sacred Scriptures as spiritual reading, from a text approved by competent authority and with the reverence due to the divine word, for at least half an hour; if the time is less, the indulgence will be *partial*.”³

³ USCCB, *Manual of Indulgences* (2006) 30 §1 (p. 100).