

WITH THE
Word of God
LECTIO DIVINA

A Guide for Prayer in School, Home and Parish

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AND CHRISTOPHER O'DONNELL O.CARM

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*In memory of our parents
and of those who brought us to faith.*

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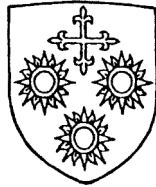
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Foreword



There are many books on prayer. Indeed the contemporary interest in prayer and spirituality is one of the most significant and hopeful signs in the Church today. How I pray reflects how I believe. That is why prayer is so inspired by Scripture. As St Ambrose said: "We speak to Him when we pray; we listen to Him when we read divine Scripture."

I am particularly pleased to welcome this revised book on prayer and Scripture. An important instruction from the Holy See on Popular Piety and Liturgy has spoken extensively about praying with Scripture. It notes, "Since the Church is built on, and grows through, listening to the Word of God, the Christian faithful should acquire a familiarity with Sacred Scripture and be imbued with its spirit." The document goes on to say, "The Bible offers an inexhaustible source of inspiration to popular piety, as well as unrivalled forms of prayer and thematic subjects." (#87).

The authors of this book, Fr Chris and Sr Jude, have drawn on their combined gifts and experience in theology and education.

The Rt Rev Alan Williams,
Bishop of Brentwood

Introduction

PRAYING WITH SCRIPTURE

It is common to hear about a hunger for spirituality, or even a hunger for prayer. How are we to satisfy our hunger? If we have not eaten for a long while, then a hamburger at a fast food outlet will be very satisfying. But we are being warned by government and health authorities that too much fast food is not good: it is not a balanced diet, it puts on the wrong kind of weight. It is fine to try different styles of cooking but we need a healthy pattern of eating for everyday health and growth.

So too in our spiritual life. We can occasionally try various kinds of prayer. But we need some established pattern that we can fall back on, that will sustain us in bad weather and fair weather. Some people go around the prayer garden like a bee. They go to a flower and suck it dry; then they move off to another flower, hoping for more honey. They hop from one way of prayer to another, without staying long enough to find the true riches in any form of prayer.

One question that we can ask ourselves is, why might we need a new method? This volume of scriptural reflections draws on an ancient tradition of prayer, which has become very popular in recent decades. It sets down the Scripture as an anchor for prayer. We will of course pray in other ways, such as attending our church for Sunday worship, or other favourite devotions, or prayer moments like a blessing before meals.

Bible and Life

The Second Vatican Council warned us: "One of the gravest errors of our time is the split between the faith which many profess, and the practice of their daily lives" (*Church in the Modern World* GS 43). The task is to integrate religion and life. The glue that keeps them together is prayer.

Life draws us to prayer so that we can get a better perspective on situations; faith offers a new vision of reality.

The main place where this fusion occurs is prayer. It would seem that prayer based on the Scriptures would have an immediate advantage in drawing us from the world to the vision of faith, and of pointing our faith vision to the realities of daily life. The Vatican Instruction, *Popular Piety and the Liturgy* (2001) states, "It is impossible to imagine a Christian prayer without direct or indirect reference to the Sacred Scripture" (#12). It also deplored the dualism between liturgy and piety that developed in the Middle Ages. One of the reasons for this development is said to be "lack of sufficient knowledge of the Scriptures on the part not only of the laity, but of many clerics and religious" (#30). It strongly recommends the integration of the Word of God and popular piety.

How to read the Bible

People may well hear such exhortations to use the Scriptures more, but react like the Ethiopian who said to Philip, "How can I understand unless someone shows me?" (Acts 8:31). The Bible is a complex

book; or, rather, more than seventy books, all of various kinds. It takes years of study to become a true scriptural scholar or exegete. Their work is essential for the Church, and it gradually proliferates through the Christian community. Few nowadays would think that Moses put pen to paper and wrote fully himself the first five books of the Bible.

Catholics are told that access to the Scripture ought to be open to all the faithful (Vatican II, *Constitution on Revelation* DV 22). Is there not a danger of going astray when ordinary, non-experts, read the Scripture? There is indeed. But we are also told that the magisterium alone gives authoritative interpretations of the sacred text (DV 10). Some theologians suggest that there are only two or three such authoritative interpretations. Is it dangerous then to read the Bible? Well, yes it can be. But we will be protected with the help of the Holy Spirit and by following tried and tested ways of looking at Scripture.

We need to realise that we are not alone in reading the Scriptures. We have the author of the Bible, the Holy Spirit, to help us. If we are to allow our Helper and Guide to lead us into the depths of the Word of God, then we need to avoid bringing too much clutter or baggage to the text. We are best with the text in openness to the Spirit.

An ancient and new method

For over one thousand years a method has developed that allows such simple reading of the Scripture. It is a method, not an elaborate set of rules or a set of hoops that we have to navigate. But a method is helpful. We have all had the

experience of opening the Bible and sitting there with no thoughts coming. It is then easy to read the introduction to the translation we are using, look at the maps, admire the cover – all nice things to do, but hardly praying!

The ancient method was called *Lectio Divina* or Divine Reading. It was a way of praying with the Scriptures that proceeds in a few very natural steps. We should always begin with some prayer. St Teresa of Avila suggested beginning with the “I confess,” thus recognising our sins and preparing to come to God. We could make up such a prayer based on the penitential rite at the liturgy; we look at ourselves and God and say, “Lord have mercy.” One could then ask for the help of the Holy Spirit.

The method begins with reading a text. It is useful to read out loud. Here is God’s Word. He is speaking to me or to the group that is praying. In the Eastern Churches people call the Bible “God’s love-letter to his people.” The most natural thing then is to ask, what is the text saying? We read it carefully, looking for the story or the meaning of the passage. It is helpful to watch out for details, to keep an eye on the verbs, which tell us who is acting, or what is happening. Silence is important, as it can take time for us to see the details.

If we have the Word of God addressed to us, there is a natural progression to another stage. We should surely wonder, what is it saying to me, to us now? If we have not had the first stage of careful reading of the text, we will not have good reflection. It takes time to allow the text to speak personally. We can think of ourselves in the scene, we can hear the words as addressed to us, we

can apply it to our life situation. The point here is making the Word of God personal.

But there is surely another step we can take. We are in dialogue with God. In the first stage we are trying to understand the text with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Then we hope that the Spirit will give us ideas of how that text related to us. These two steps focus more on God speaking to us: we are not, however, wholly passive, we are listening and alert, but also thinking. Now it is natural that we respond to God. We can speak to God in our own words. We can use a few words, phrases from Scripture or from well-loved prayers.

The important thing is that we make these our own.

Finally, we can stay with the text. We have been listening, thinking, speaking. Now is the time for rest. We look back over the text and take some idea that has struck or is just now striking us. An image might be of having a last look at a nice view before moving on, or picking a single flower from a garden or a field.

Alone or in groups

This simple method or prayer in four stages – reading, reflecting, responding, and resting – can be used when we are praying alone or in groups. If we are alone, we can divide up our time according to the way in which we feel drawn. If we wonder how long we should stay with any section, the answer might be “a little longer”. Sometimes it is when we think there is nothing more to see or find, that we get another insight or thought.

If we are praying in groups then one person can lead the session and quietly suggest moving on to each phase. It is important that the person who is leading is not seen as an expert. We are at prayer, not at class. We do not ask questions and expect some person cleverer than ourselves to have the answer. We are there to listen to God who will be speaking to us through others. Questions can be asked later. We should try to create a welcoming atmosphere in which each person will feel that his or her contribution will be received with respect.

Using this book

This book is offered as an introduction or guide to praying with Scripture. It is designed for use alone or with others such as parish societies, or Bible groups. It is also very suitable for schools. The texts are chosen to reflect the great concerns of the Old and New Testaments and to present some of the principal figures of each. The compilers of the text have kept an eye continually on the *Here I Am* religious education programme. Each text has an introduction, which sets the context of the passage.

After the text one will find the four stages of the scriptural method of *lectio divina*: Reading, Reflection, Response, Rest. In each section there are leading questions that will help the person or the group to focus: what is the text saying? what does it mean to me/to us? making up or recalling some prayer response; remaining with the text.

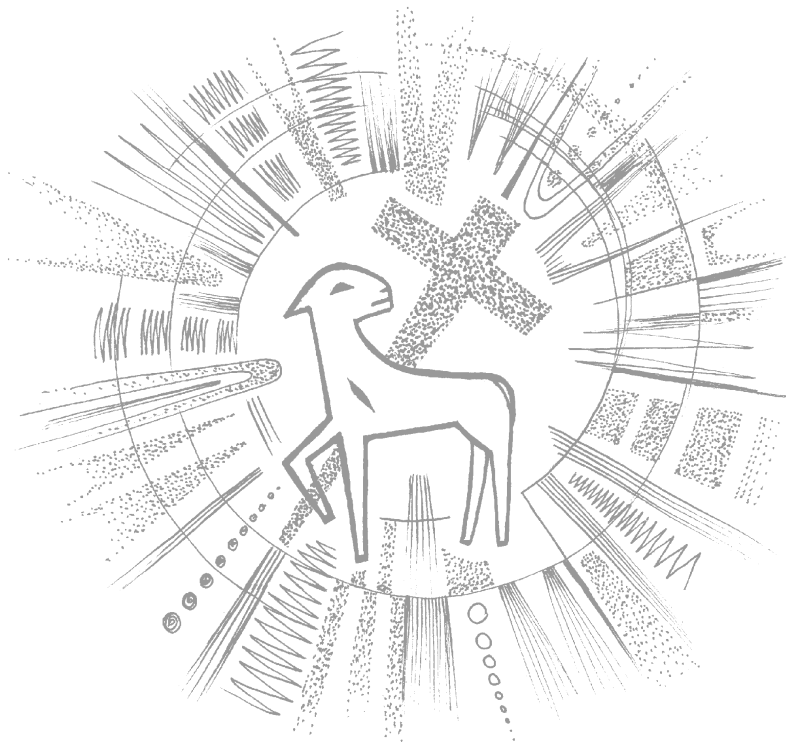
With each section there are possible prompts. These are only indicators and should be ignored if a person or the group has other ideas to support this stage of prayer. On the other hand they

may help give a line of thought that people would like to explore further.

Finally, there is a suggested concluding prayer. But there are innumerable possibilities of other prayers, phrases from Scripture, set prayers, lines from hymns, or something composed spontaneously.

The compilers of this book hope that it may help people to set out on the voyage of biblical prayer.

The method has been found extremely helpful in the preparation of homilies. It can help with the prayerful reading of Scripture that is recommended by the Vatican document, on popular piety, which is quoting the Second Vatican Council: "Prayer should accompany the reading of Sacred Scripture so that a dialogue takes place" (#88; DV 25).



Jeremiah's call

INTRODUCTION

- The Prophet Jeremiah was called by God about 627 BC. He was a reluctant prophet. God's call helped Jeremiah to know himself.
- The greatest learning that will take place for us will be the journey of knowing ourselves. It has been said that when

speaking about the spiritual life, there are three important truths I must know about myself.

- 1) I am a sinner and selfish.
- 2) I am weak.
- 3) I am holy.

Discovering ourselves is a life-long task.

SCRIPTURE

Jeremiah 1: 4-10

THE LORD said to me, "I chose you before I gave you life. And before you were born I selected you to be a prophet to the nations." I answered, "Sovereign Lord, I don't know how to speak; I am too young." But the Lord said to me, "Do not say that you are too young, but go to the people I send you to, and tell them everything I command you to say. Do not be afraid of them, for I will be with you to protect you. I, the Lord, have spoken!" Then the Lord stretched out his hand touched my lips, and said to me, "Listen, I am giving you the words you must speak. Today I give you authority over nations and kingdoms to uproot and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant."

1. READING

What is going on?

Read the text and ask, what is going on?
What strikes you about this passage?
Details? Actions?

Possible prompts:

- I chose you before I gave you life.
- Before you were born I selected you to be a prophet to the nations.
- Go to the people I send you to and tell them everything I command you to say.

- Do not be afraid of them, I will be with you to protect you.
- Listen, I am giving you the words you must speak.
- They will not defeat you.

2. REFLECTION

What does it mean for us?

Read the text again. What phrase do you like in the text and why? What word attracts you? How does the text speak to you in the various places and situations in which you find yourself?

Possible prompts:

- The Lord chose us before we were born.
- Do we hear, "Do not be afraid...?"
- Do we feel his protecting love?
- Speaking his words to others.
- The Word of God coming to me.

3. RESPONSE

Making some prayers

Read the text again. We have heard God's Word and we have tried to see what it means. We can talk to Jesus about his message. It can be a prayer you know, or one you make up.

Possible prompts:

- Thank you for choosing me to speak your words to others.
- Give me the courage of Jeremiah the prophet.
- When life is difficult, help me hear you say, "Do not be afraid."

4. REST

Enjoy the text

Read the text again.

Pause – a minute or two of silence with the text.

Then take away a few words from this time of reflection, prayer or meditation as a message for today.

- The Lord chose me even before I was born.
- God's protecting love is with me always.

A CONCLUDING PRAYER

Father, we are your chosen people.

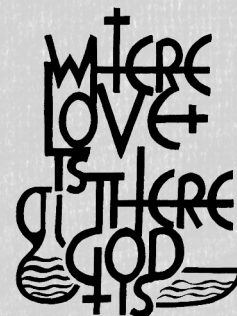
May we live with compassion, kindness, humility and patience.

May we forgive each other as you forgive us.

May we live with the love which brings everyone together in perfect harmony.

May the peace of Christ reign in our hearts.

May the words we speak and the deeds we perform in your Son's name tell you of our thanks and praise.



Annunciation to Mary

INTRODUCTION

■ At the very end of the Old Testament God's plan for the world was ready. It involves Mary being asked to be the Mother of the Messiah, who was the Son of God.

■ It is often said that all endings are new beginnings. Each moment of each day we stand at the gateway of new beginnings. Beginnings are times of hope, high expectations and great enthusiasm. Beginnings can also be occasions of fear. As we meditate on the following, we meet with Mary the Lord of all beginnings

SCRIPTURE

Luke 1: 26-38

IN THE sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to a town in Galilee named Nazareth. He had a message for a girl promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, who was a descendant of King David.

The girl's name was Mary. The angel came to her and said, "Peace be with you! The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you!" Mary was deeply troubled by the angel's message and she wondered what his words meant. "Mary; God had been gracious to you, You will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High God. The Lord God will make him a king, as his ancestor David was, and he will be the king of all descendants of Jacob for ever; his kingdom will never end!" Mary said to the angel, "I am a virgin. How, then, can this be?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and God's power will rest upon you. For this reason the holy child will be called the Son of God. Remember your relative, Elizabeth. It is said that she cannot have children, but she herself is now six months pregnant, even though she is very old. For there is nothing that God cannot do." "I am the Lord's servant, " said Mary; "may it happen to me as you have said." And the angel left her.

1. READING

What is going on?

Read the text and ask, what is going on?
What strikes you about this passage?
Details? Actions?

Possible prompts:

- God sends an angel with a message to Mary, an engaged young woman.
- The angel's greeting.
- Why was Mary puzzled and upset?
- The angel's reaction and explanation.
- The Holy Spirit will come upon you and God's power will rest upon you.

2. REFLECTION

What does it mean for us?

Read the text again. What phrase do you like in the text and why? What word attracts you? How does the text speak to you in the various places and situations you find yourself?

Possible prompts:

- God comes also to us?
- God says: "Do not be afraid."
- Have we ever felt the power of God's love resting on us?
- To be like Mary.
- God can do everything.
- Do we say with Mary – We are the servants of the Lord?

3. RESPONSE

Making some prayers

Read the text again. We have heard God's Word and we have tried to see what it means. We can talk to Jesus about his message. It can be a prayer you know, or one you make up.

Possible prompts:

- Thanks for messages of love.
- Thanks for blessings.
- Thanks for beginnings.
- Thanks for relief of fear.

4. REST

Enjoy the text

Read the text again.

Pause – a minute or two of silence with the text. Then take away a few words from this time of reflection, prayer or meditation as a message for today.

- "Peace be with you."
- "Do not be afraid."
- "The Lord is with you and has greatly blessed you."



A CONCLUDING PRAYER from the Angelus

*The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary,
and she conceived by the Holy Spirit.
Hail Mary...*

*Behold the handmaid of the Lord.
Be it done unto me according to your
word. Hail Mary...*

*The Word was made flesh
and dwelt among us, Hail Mary...*

*Pray for us, O Holy Mother of God:
That we may be made worthy of the
promises of Christ.*

Blessing of children

INTRODUCTION

■ In the Gospel we see Jesus' love for children. We also find that the ease, trust and simplicity of children are for Jesus the ideal way to come to him.

■ The birth and arrival of a baby is one of the greatest signs and wonder of God's love, not only to the family but also to all

around. It unites a family in great rejoicing and happiness. In this meditation we meet Jesus who blesses the babies and asks us to trust him as children do.

SCRIPTURE

Luke 18: 15-1

SOME PEOPLE brought their babies to Jesus for him to place his hands on them. The disciples saw them and scolded them for doing so, but Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the children come to me and do not stop them, because the Kingdom of God belongs to such as these. Remember this! Whoever does not receive the Kingdom of God like a child will never enter it."



1. READING

What is going on?

Read the text and ask, what is going on? What strikes you about this passage? Details? Actions?

Possible prompts:

- Bringing babies to Jesus; why?
- The disciples upset.
- What does Jesus do and say?
- The word about the Kingdom.

2. REFLECTION

What does it mean for us?

Read the text again. What phrase do you like in the text and why? What word attracts you? How does the text speak to you in the various places and situations you find yourself?

Possible prompts:

- Who has brought us to Jesus?
- Do we hear God's call to us to come to him?
- What is important about the way we love Jesus and his message?
- We must not stop others or keep them away from Jesus.

3. RESPONSE

Making some prayers

Read the text again. We have heard God's Word and we have tried to see what it means. We can talk to Jesus about his message. It can be a prayer you know or one you make up.

Possible prompts:

- Thank you for all your blessings on all of us.
- Help our families to love you more.
- Show us how to trust you.
- Protect all babies and all who love them.

4. REST

Enjoy the text

Read the text again.

Pause – a minute or two of silence with the text.

Then take away a few words from this time of reflection, prayer or meditation as a message for today.

- The greatest is the one who becomes like a child.
- Whoever welcomes a child welcomes me.

A CONCLUDING PRAYER

I love you, Jesus,

My love above all things.

*I repent with my whole heart of having
offended you.*

*Never permit me to separate myself
from you again;*

Grant that I may love you always,

And then do with me what you will.

St Alphonsus

