

Pandemic Practices: The Art of *Lectio Divina* in Ministry Formation Programs

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PRELUDE

This article is intentionally far from seamless. It is loosely organized as a theological reflection, implicitly guided by the Wesleyan quadrilateral: Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience, understanding this as a spiral-shaped learning method. I have written in a staccato writing style that invites the reader to skip about on the surface of its landscape, each skip having the potential to initiate a disorientating dilemma (more on this) so as to awaken the reader to the value of intentionally introducing *lectio divina* across our theological curriculums as necessary formation and theological preparation for our emerging church leaders in an increasingly secular culture. I offer four traditional points of persuasion, with a fifth suggesting that through the introduction of *lectio divina* a transformative, conversational, grace-filled perspective change is at work that is formative for the needs of leadership in a changing culture. This article is a slice of my still ongoing postdoctoral inquiry into perspective change as spiritual transformation, in

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service towards a theology of learning that I believe is necessary in preparing our future leaders for the cultural rigors they will face while in a church which itself is in a paradigm shift as it transitions from Christendom. *Lectio divina* is a learning journey of grace being realized through the anomalies of the punctuated and sacramental universe we inhabit, and the global pandemic is one such anomaly.

INTRODUCTION

I begin in the same place our field placement students begin—with an incident. The incident I have chosen to reflect upon was prompted by an ecclesial announcement at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic which caused me sufficient distress that I realized it was time to be intentional about theological reflection. I had landed in what I knew was a rich, messy, and confusing spiritual learning moment where hills and valleys tumbled upon one another and where it was difficult to distinguish the mountaintop from the plummeted depth—a felt experience as tangible as birth pangs.¹

THE INCIDENT

The reality of the COVID-19 pandemic hit home for me in March of 2020 when the Ecclesiastical Province of Ontario, which is comprised of seven Anglican dioceses,² delivered three pastoral announcements. The first, the decision to close all the churches, was followed quickly by a call for us to “Fast from the Eucharist and Feast on God’s Word.” Neither announcement came as a surprise. The third announcement came three months later and declared a unilateral Sabbath rest to address, we were told, the stress Anglican church leaders were experiencing. I was stunned.³

I quickly recognized I was experiencing all the classic signs of a disorientating dilemma.⁴ Hearing the rising pitch of my voice as I repeatedly said, “What? You’ve got to be kidding me!” was my clue. I knew the possibility of insight awaited if I was willing to forge ahead on an uncomfortable, theologically reflective learning journey.

I was quick to recognize that Sabbath rest as a remedy for clergy stress in the face of a pandemic was challenging my core value of priesthood: solidarity with the afflicted. The ecclesial call smacked of entitlement,⁵ or so I was telling myself. In the next step, my learning journey came close to being

aborted. To be true to the theological reflective process, I had to spend an uncomfortable time hovering around the silent spaces of my mind. There, I could viscerally feel my self-righteous judgement of others peeking through, complete with the tingle of heat at the back of my neck which served as confirmation of my shame at my lack of charity towards my peers.⁶ I knew my willingness to feel this shame was only due to my decades of desire to “seek the Lord while he may be found”⁷ being greater than my ego’s need for intellectual respectability as a clergy person.⁸

I had sufficient experience with the art of reflection to know my journey was still not complete, and sure enough—there, tucked behind that twinge of shame—was another space waiting for truth to enter. It took a moment for this feeling to give way to its linguistic shape, but there it was: fear. It took a little more time, just holding the word suspended in the silence, for the word to fan out with its informing image.⁹ The word fear brought forth a logical question: “Was this fear of the pandemic?” I asked myself. No, that was not it; it was more pervasive. I felt myself standing before an immense, stable wall of darkness, and I calmly waited. Finally, the narrative emerged into consciousness; my fear is for a church woefully unprepared for what lies ahead in an ever-changing, secular, market-driven culture. I breathed deeply and felt an internal shift. I felt the words before I heard them: “Be still and know that I am God.”¹⁰ They filled me like light fills a dark room. I felt the “peace that passes all understanding”¹¹ viscerally. I knew unshakingly the experience of abiding in God. I knew all shall be well. Logic inquired, “Have I just borrowed these words of Julian of Norwich?” No, she and I and countless others have felt this same abiding promise of God “to be with us always, to the end of time”¹² through the lived experience of the ages, “yesterday, today and forever.”¹³

MY HUNCHES

It is possible that the COVID-9 closure of churches is the upset that brought clergy, and certainly this clergy, face to face with our own lack of relevance for, as we all know, the world went on even with churches closed. Loss is stressful, but it is especially so when we lose the reality-shaping perspective of our identity. The church perceives itself as an essential service, and it is, but not in the ways we often think it is. The pandemic served as a disruptive catalyst, causing clergy driven by a self-imposed urgency to be

relevant, and this activated online busyness, frantic home delivery of the status quo and weekly orders of worship with a copy of Sunday's sermon, thereby filling the unthinkable void in an attempt to will the unthinkable not to be, and this all happened under the umbrella of being pastoral. Pastoral to whom? How many parishioners sought these supports and how many utilized them? Maybe we are afraid to ask.

These observational hunches are drawn from a small, local database, but the situation does convince me that church leadership has shifted its eyes and efforts onto many things and looks to secondary activities as primary necessities, when in fact the real necessity for fruitfulness needs to be first and foremost anchored in a relationship with God through prayer. The pandemic has jolted me awake so that I now realize how distracted and complacent a people of faith we have become in Christendom and how only a singular, dependent gaze upon God can lead us back so we can navigate in a forward direction in highly unfamiliar and changing times.

DISORIENTATING QUESTIONS

As field educators who take reflection seriously, we might pause and vigorously ask ourselves if we really are adequately preparing the future leadership of the church for what lies ahead when, if the truth be spoken, we have no idea what the future holds. All we know is: "God was, is and ever shall be . . . love."¹⁴ Are we sufficiently steeping students in this formative, singular gaze on the triune God while they are under our tutelage or do we make assumptions that through the content, experience, and practical applications we teach, the student is able to discern God in the midst of life, not as an exterior subject matter but as a living reality anchored in their interiority and enmeshed in their own history? A colleague of mine writes at the bottom of his course material: "All theology is to be done on our knees."¹⁵ These words grip me as truth, but how do we bring this into reality? I would like to suggest that *lectio divina* is the method of prayer that can bring this axiom into our students' lives, ensuring that all our theological course content and the field experiences we mentor are integrative, conversational, on point, and directed at the triune God. There is nothing so pervasively pointless¹⁶ in theological education as the divorcing of content from the One whom the content is illuminating. It is through *lectio divina*, I argue, that unity of subject is attained without sacrificing the great diversi-

ty of theological subject matter that must be taught to prepare our students for demanding leadership. In this article I assume the essential necessity of theological reflection in a theological curriculum and propound that the ancient spiritual practice of *lectio divina* can serve as the necessary preparatory lens for insightful, theological reflection and theological study, now properly focused.

WHAT IS *LECTIO DIVINA*?

I am sure *lectio divina* is well known to readers of this journal. It is a prayerful reading of God's word, not for content but rather to abide in and commune with God. *Lectio* stands against the historical-critical study of Holy Scripture and as we all know is intended to be a daily wellspring for the nourishment of our interior life.¹⁷ Less known is that *lectio* has two historic branches: one monastic, which was well established by the sixth century when St. Benedict was forming his monastic rule, and the other a later scholastic form. Both have the four familiar traditional movements: *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditating), *oratio* (praying), and *contemplatio* (resting in God). The monastic form understands these movements as spontaneous and under the direction of the Holy Spirit, whereas the scholastic approach grasps the movements as hierarchical steps. My practice, training, and delight has been in the former.

Preparation begins, of course, by focusing on the threefold wonder of the Scriptures: that the word of God is being held in one's hands (in and under a human-penned script), that the text holds within it a divine welcome and invitation to abide and commune through God's word, and finally that the Spirit, the third person of the Trinity who inspired the Scriptures to be written, is the same Spirit who leads the faithful to dwell and find life in the word of the Lord. These three well-known considerations are to be pondered as awe-inspiring truths, not factual propositional statements, although they are the latter as well. The trusting dependence of awe and wonder is key to a soul-nourishing, interior, prayerful reading of the text as opposed to an intellectual reading with the intent to extract content.

This preparation of lingering wonder opens the heart to receptivity and the intention to simply to abide, to be enough, so as to ensure God is the subject of our desire and longing and human utility is not manipulating the experience for self-serving purposes. God is wholly the point and

purpose, the counterpoint to Augustine's pointlessness, giving *lectio* an eschatological telos. We sit holding the word of God, attentively listening for God's loving word, not seeking the wooden, literal meaning of the text but engaging in a listening of the heart that captures and subdues us, holding us in its grip.

Allow me to awkwardly attempt to illustrate the different degrees of perception using the common experience of an evening sunset. We can totally miss a sunset when we are preoccupied, we can see a sunset and note its presence, we can encounter a sunset and then stop to enjoy its beauty, or we can *behold* a sunset. Each is a sensory experience, that is true, but the fourth is a spiritual moment as the sunset ceases to be the object of our enjoyment and the thing itself becomes a living symbol that grips, seizes, and takes hold of us, pointing to something more than just a beautiful sky, and we find ourselves awakened to the majesty and artistry of the creator. The created order gives to us, and in response we spontaneously give thanks as we are held by its beauty. Beholding a sunset takes our breath away; it is a sacramental moment so imprinted on the soul never to be forgotten; we can recall the feeling with nothing more than the heart's slightest turn of desire. The word of God offers this experience of beholding more formatively than the sunset because of the comprehensive nature of the narrative experience and its ability to speak into our lives, which a sunset cannot do. It is only after I narrate the language of the experience of beholding that my students and parishioners are able to identify and celebrate a similar experience in their own lives. Up until then, the feeling of the experience has been walled off or lost to them.

What *lectio* calls forth is perpetual, never-ceasing awe and wonder before God. Awe is where all clear sight starts, creating the possibility of a spiritual paradigm shift in one's life. A student's soul that has *beheld* the glory of God among us is enabled to then direct their will, making discerning action genuine. It is this quality of awe-filled listening which our students need as they study the theological disciplines to bring them to spiritually mature theological reflection and thus to leadership in uncharted waters. In time, *lectio* ceases to be a spiritual practice and just becomes our way of life—shaped, formed, and embedded by abiding in the love of God which in turn shapes the perceptions and insights gleaned in theological reflection.

I had a student who was quite distressed because he said St. Augustine did nothing more than proof-text in his *Confessions*. This student did not

understand that when one is steeped in the Scriptures, the biblical language of experience becomes the truest and most authentic way to express oneself. So, Augustine would write in confession: "O Lord, in Your delight with this sweet odor rising from Your holy temple, have mercy on me according to your great mercy, for Your Name's sake."¹⁸ The plea is personal but not original, picking up the ancient sentiment of sorrow and remorse and creating a snowball effect whereby today's sorrow joins the authenticity of all repentance offered throughout the ages. My student missed this because he failed to begin his inquiry in awe and wonder and so drifted badly, giving the literal reading the sole power of interpretation. The practice of *lectio* in this student's life may have kept him on course.

FOUR INTERNAL PERSUASIONS

Biblical Warrant

The biblical narrative giving voice to God's love precedes all our own and our students' incidents, and in this they will find the trusting confidence to embrace theological reflection deeply and be willing to be changed through the point of the text, which is love. There is no shortage of scriptural warrant calling the faithful to love God singularly with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength and to love our neighbour as ourselves. Yet, students continually fall into the trap that the content of a course and the grade they will receive, in service to a career position, are the necessitating imperatives. Students approach the two-source hypothesis of the Synoptic Gospels in a vacuum, missing the general awe and wonder behind the long process of the development of Scriptures and instead land in a one-dimensional literal ghetto, leaving them vulnerable to shifts in biblical theory. To love God is more than an invitation to drop in occasionally; it is required for a transformative, spiritual change in perspective to take place in our students, a formative change that they will require if they are to lead in challenging times. *Lectio divina* provides an ethical, self-directed method towards this end that is worthy of consideration.

I invited my students to a series of Sunday evening Taizé services. The repetition of the Scriptures made an impression, for they would come bouncing in to class midweek announcing with gleeful surprise that God had spoken to them while they were mowing the lawn or tending to the dishes. The Word of Scripture had broken into their consciousness unex-

pectedly. Prior to this, they had only experienced the word of God as exterior to themselves, and to hear the word emerging from within noticeably brought them a joy that was distinguishable from happiness.

Historical Longevity

Lectio has a long history in the life of the church, beginning in the plain, oral reading of the Scriptures in community which can be traced to the ancient Jewish practice of reading the Torah. The earliest reference to this practice is found in a letter penned by St. Cyprian to a friend in 256 in which Cyprian sums up his own experience and points to an already accepted tradition when he writes: "You are to be diligent in prayer and in *lectio*; that is how you speak to God and God in turn speaks to you."¹⁹

Over the centuries, *lectio* has shifted from a community reading to personal devotion, and now group reading is on the rise, perhaps not as part of worship but more often in study or discernment group settings. The method of *lectio* and its context may change, but the interior intention to abide with God remains constant. History positions *lectio* as a gift received primarily from the Orthodox and Roman Catholic contemplative traditions, but to reject *lectio* due to long-standing denominational bias would be foolish. As field educators, we are aware of the content of the Reformation and post-Reformation founding documents by theological giants such as Calvin, Luther, and Wesley, but the theological reflective question arising, at least in me, is: "This is great theology, but how do we bring these thoughts into the lived experience?" *Lectio* is the answer, I maintain, because it is the method of prayer that shapes the common, interior intention of the heart so that theology born in the intellect can be grounded in what we know through experience and not just what we know about.

Lectio as an approach to God, with the Scriptures serving as the medium, is not tied to any particular denomination. Our students should not be denied awareness of this gift and the opportunity to practice it. When I suggest to my students they practice this ancient way to pray, they immediately want to know if they will get extra marks for their effort, but when I invite them to prayerfully experience God's word through the music of Taizé, they are very receptive. It's all about finding the right approach.

Liturgical Expression

The traditional art of our public reading of the Scriptures in church may seem to be similar to the ancient form of *lectio*, but I believe the contextual differences between the listeners then and now make this a naive conclusion. The one place I do sense *lectio* being corporately experienced is in the music of Taizé, which I incorporate each Sunday morning as the psalm to serve as a counter to the mechanical recitation of the psalms alternately by half verse which is so common in Anglican liturgical worship. I follow this liturgical irregularity to gently mentor the congregation in the felt experience of praying the Scriptures. *Lectio* is a method of prayer meant to integrate and direct the body, mind, and soul towards God in trusting dependence as a response of open gratitude and thanks, maybe even as our *qorban*,²⁰ where our abiding presence is continually being reconstituted in God's eternally coming presence within us.

As field educators, we have a responsibility to place before our students the practical methods of prayer they require to live and lead lives of spiritual integrity and pointedness, capable of insight. To raise a supporting word from wisdom far past: "the intellect finds it hard to endure praying . . . but turns joyfully to theology because of the broad and unhampered scope of divine speculation."²¹ This comment from the early church recognizes that theological content for its own sake is an enticing lure that relegates God to a footnote. We as theological educators need to help our students reflect on this wrong turn and invite them to get back on track. We can show them how by introducing them to *lectio divina*.

Theologically Integrated Formation

The body of Christ, in all its denominational colours, is encountering as never before an increasingly strident, secular, market-driven, and very persuasive culture. Thank goodness theologies are emerging to address the church's drastically changing context, but are our newest leaders ready? One such theological work from the last century is offered by George Lindbeck of Yale Divinity School in his seminal 1984 book *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*. Lindbeck presents a cultural-linguistic theological model for consideration, looking to the church's doctrinal life as regulatory and speaking of doctrine as "the grammar of the church," a grammar that needs to be learned. He sees or maybe he senses the formative connection between language and perception as formation. Could it be

that theological reflection, with *lectio* incorporated, might serve as the integrating methodology for a cultural-linguistic approach to religion, offering an ever-maturing spiritual wisdom that is rooted first and foremost in the God of the text who is radical, unceasing love?²² Between Lindbeck's thesis and my wondering stands a long road of inquiry leading into the very nature of spiritual perception and the role which language, symbol, rite, ritual, and myth play in God's grammar of grace being realized in us.²³

CONCLUSION

Lectio divina is a prayerful method to raise up mature, insightful, spiritually formed, and theologically sound leaders. It is nothing more than a considered response to the first commandment from which all else flows.

I took a quick look at the websites of Canadian seminaries, schools of theology, and lay schools during COVID-19 and found they read much like theological marketplaces, with God implied but not sought as the primary subject, as the beginning and end of all theological reflection. This observation seems worthy of reflective analysis.

Persuasion alone will not bring *lectio divina* into our curriculums; it will take a disorientating jolt to wake us up to see anew the wisdom and necessity of basing a theological education on a living relationship with God, who waits in the sacred text for us. I wonder if the pandemic will drive us there.

I close with a prayer brought to my attention by Stephen Andrews when he was my bishop; he now is the principal of Wycliffe College, an evangelical Anglican seminary in Toronto, Ontario. The desire expressed in this prayer is the desire of all the faithful throughout all the ages, and it echoes the longing expressed in the sacred text. In *lectio* this longing is both discovered and met. Do we want anything less for our up-and-coming leaders?

May we see Christ more clearly,
love him more dearly,
and follow him more nearly Amen

—Richard, Bishop of Chichester (1197–1253)

NOTES

- 1 This is a general description of how I experience perspective changes.
- 2 The seven dioceses in the Ecclesiastical Province of Ontario are Toronto, Huron, Niagara, Algoma, Moosonee, Ontario, and Ottawa
- 3 Being stunned is descriptive of a disorientating dilemma, the first stage in a transformative perspective change.
- 4 Jack Mezirow, *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1991), 168. Mezirow, an educational theorist, identifies a disorientating dilemma as the first stage of a transformative perspective change.
- 5 My reaction also reveals my obedience to ecclesial holy orders, an interior, formed behaviour.
- 6 Shame is the second stage of a transformative perspective change, according to Mezirow. His seminal article on this is "Perspective Transformation," *Adult Education* 28, no. 2 (1978): 3–24.
- 7 Isaiah 55:6a, all references are from the NRSV.
- 8 Incidents are never experienced in isolation but are always preceded and shaped by previous learning and ultimately by the scriptural worldview.
- 9 Susanne Langer gives this movement of feeling to linguistic expression rich exploration and description in her *Philosophy in a New Key: A Study in the Symbolism of Reason, Rite, and Art* (New York: Harper and Bros., 1942), 62, 63. She draws on the example of Helen Keller to explore "the mystery and advent of language which awakened Keller's soul, giving it light, hope, joy and setting it free."
- 10 Psalm 46:10.
- 11 Philippians 4:7.
- 12 Matthew 28:20.
- 13 Hebrews 13:8.
- 14 St. John 4:7–21.
- 15 The colleague I mention is Rev'd Dr. John Harvey.
- 16 This is a reference to Augustine's pear tree incident in which pointlessness is the antithesis of God, making all that is not to God's glory essentially pointless. I view pointlessness as being on a spectrum. J. M. Lelen, trans., *Confessions of St. Augustine* (Totowa, NJ: Catholic Book Publishing, 1997), vol. 1, book 2, chap. 4, p. 54. Psalm 51:3.
- 17 Charles, Dumont, *Praying the Word of God* (Fairacres, Oxford: SLG Press, 1999), 1.
- 18 Lelen, *Confessions of St. Augustine*, 267.
- 19 Dumont, *Praying the Word of God*, 1.

- 20 I first heard the term *qorban* when reading a respected commentary on *Leviticus* by Ephraim Radner, my doctoral thesis director. It means an offering of our fullest integrity with nothing held back. Ephraim Radner, *Leviticus*, SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: SCM Press, 2008), 41.
- 21 Gerald Eustace Howell Palmer, Kallistos Ware, and Philip Sherrard, *The Philokalia*, vol. 1 (London: Faber and Faber, 1979), 27.
- 22 Lindbeck's book, along with Susanne Langer's writings, especially *Philosophy in a New Key*, shed some light on how members of my country parish could attend a church that was going through a positive cultural change and yet have no spiritual awareness of it. They could not see or even perceive the hand of God in the extraordinary events because of their Christendom-shaped faith and therefore lacked the internalized language of faith for perception. George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1984).
- 23 Lindbeck's *The Nature of Doctrine* draws upon Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*, and Langer stands on the shoulders of William Cassirer. The relationship between their ideas is discussed in the preface to William Schultz's *Cassirer and Langer on Myth: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2013).