

Things to Consider

- ▶ Decide the best time for you to be engaging in sacred reading and then try to spend this time in a quiet spot each day. You may sometimes need to vary the time and perhaps you will not be able to do it every day. The important thing is to be faithful to the extent that you can, do your best, and not let it become so burdensome that you feel guilty when unable to do it.
- ▶ Before beginning, decide on the passage from Scripture that you will read. Some passages are unhelpful and will not provide much 'food'. You will probably find that the Psalms, the Gospels, and some of Paul's writings, provide a rich source of material. It may be that you will choose to work your way through one of the Gospels, taking a brief passage each time. Some may find a translation such as Eugene Peterson's *The Message* very helpful in bringing the text alive.
- ▶ When you come to reading, do not read too much for you will find that less becomes more. Also avoid turning this time into a Bible study. Read slowly, thoughtfully, and see what 'speaks' to you from the text.
- ▶ Before you begin, spend a few moments sitting in silence, in a sense, to gather yourself into God's presence. It is not that God was not present to you, but rather that you were (probably) not present to Him.
- ▶ Now begin with a brief prayer in which you ask God to 'speak' to you through the text you are about to read.
- ▶ Having done that, slowly begin to read the passage you have chosen, listening in your heart for any words or phrases that 'speak' to you in some way.
- ▶ When you feel called, move to the second stage, meditatio, and so on. Allow it to flow forwards and backwards as seems appropriate to your need at any particular moment.
- ▶ When you feel you have come to the end and there is nothing more that God wishes to say to you at this time and you have nothing more that you wish to say to God, give thanks to Him and move to your next task, but in such a way that you are able to take with you something of what you received in this time of sacred reading.

AtG/B5/MBH

Attending to God

'The Art of Sacred Reading'



We might not consciously think about it, but when we read we actually read in different ways depending on what we are reading. For example, we pick up a magazine and browse through the contents, looking for what 'grabs our attention', skim-reading the rest. We will often do this when reading a newspaper.

Another approach is that when we are reading an enjoyable novel, we are drawn into the story and savour every word.

A very different approach to reading is called for when we are studying a text book. We are reading every word carefully, trying to understand what the author is saying, looking for themes, perhaps highlighting the key points in some way and then ignoring the rest.

Sacred reading calls for a different approach. We are reading the Scriptures or some other book, with the aim to help deepen our faith. Our purpose is not to read it as we would a text book, seeking information. Down through the centuries this approach has been called *Lectio Divina*, a Latin phrase meaning a reading that comes from God and so we need to listen with care. Our approach here is formational rather than informational. It is an important distinction.

This approach has four stages but it is important that we do not see these in some descending order that we have to adhere to rigidly: now I'm doing stage one before I move to stage two and then on to stage three. Using that approach would be mechanical.

No, what we are engaged in could best be described as a living, vital conversation between ourselves and God. As with a conversation between good friends, it flows backwards and forwards. There is no rush, there are times of silence, both are relaxed, and who knows where the conversation will lead. We want to hear what our friend has to say and we want them to hear what we say. There is a deep respectfulness and communion; it can almost become an act of love at times.

There is nothing mechanical in this approach. It has been described as being like the ebb and flow of the water on the seashore. We can move backwards and forwards between any of the stages depending on our and their needs.

As with a friend, so with God, there does not need to be anything dramatic in this. Rather we are learning to listen to God in silence. We need patience and a willingness to slow down and be still and hear His 'still small voice'. (1 Kings 19.12)

To begin, we have a moment of silence and stillness leading to prayer in which we ask God to guide and bless our efforts as we seek to listen to what He may wish to say to us through the words of the text. Then we begin these four movements ...

Lectio: This first is the **reading stage**. As you read don't become too focused on the literal meaning of the text. Guigo, a 12th century Carthusian monk, described this stage as being 'like putting solid food into one's mouth'. What in the text draws you, resonates with you, or perhaps you struggle with because it seems too close to the bone? Something in the text draws you to it: a word, a phrase, a sentence. It is as if it jumps out at you. Now you just sit with it, listening and allowing it to reverberate within. In this way you are led to the second stage and this has been described as being like a hyperlink which leads us from one Internet site to the next.

Meditatio: Guigo describes this as being like 'breaking up the food in our mouth and chewing it'. You are now moving from simply looking at the words of the text to entering the world of the text. Eugene Peterson says, as we take the text into ourselves we find that the text takes us into itself. In a sense you are being drawn into a larger world: no longer are you swimming in the pool, but in the ocean. No longer are you a detached outsider, for now you have entered the world of the text. You have been drawn into it as King David was when the prophet Nathan told him a story finishing with the words, 'Thou art the man'. (2 Samuel 12.7) So, what is emerging for you from your phrase or word or sentence? What are your thoughts and feelings? This is the **thinking stage**. Now, as you listen, you find yourself wanting to say something to God.

Oratio: You have been listening to God and now you want to respond. This is the **praying stage**. You allow the words to well up from deep within like a spring that bubbles to the surface. You have slowed down, are thoughtful, and your words are few. You now open your heart to God and are in deep conversation with Him. To continue with Guigo's images of eating: you have now acquired the taste of food. You are moving from the mind to the heart.

Contemplatio: Every conversation eventually comes to an end. This is the **resting in God stage**. You have learned something about yourself and now in silence need to just sit, digesting it. Guigo describes this as 'the taste itself which gives joy and nourishes'. As St Benedict told his monks, this is the time to say 'thank you'.