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A BISHOP'S EXPERIENCE OF LECTIO DIVINA

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I have heard that during the Synod on the Word of God, *Lectio Divina* was widely discussed by the Synod Fathers. I did not participate in the Synod, but for the past 10 years I have conducted a form of public *Lectio Divina* one Sunday evening each month, except for July and August, in the Cathedrals of two Canadian dioceses, the Archdiocese of Edmonton and the Archdiocese of Toronto.

"*Lectio Divina*" is one of those terms which is both attractive and vague. Everyone agrees that it is a good thing, but there is considerable disagreement concerning precisely what it means. Fortunately, there is no copyright on "*Lectio Divina*", and therefore many people can fruitfully engage in something that they describe as "*Lectio Divina*", and use a rich array of diverse methods, without worrying about getting it wrong, or breaking the rules. I have read many books on the topic, and have benefited from them all, though conscious that no one of them is describing exactly what the others describe. So I should, at the start, define what I mean by "*Lectio Divina*." I trust that this is more or less consistent with what the term means in Catholic tradition, as I have sought to understand it, but others have somewhat different approaches to the details of the practice, and I would not presume to claim that my way of doing *Lectio Divina* in a public forum is in any way normative.

By "*Lectio Divina*" I refer to the prayerful reading of the Word of God. The intent is not to study the scriptural text. That is exegesis, and it may be helpful to engage in that before entering into *Lectio Divina*, for a knowledge of the human context of the scriptures, and their structure, is important for all who pray them. God gave us our minds, and it is good to study the Law of the Lord. But *Lectio Divina* itself is an intimate encounter with the Lord God through the medium of His inspired Word in the context of prayer. It is not exegesis.

A public session of *Lectio Divina* in the cathedral church is not a form of preaching, although the personal practice of *Lectio Divina* is an important foundation for the ministry of the preacher. One of the best formulas for preaching that I have ever heard is: "Read yourself full, pray yourself hot, think yourself clear, and let yourself go." *Lectio Divina* is an element of the "pray yourself hot" component of that formula, although in fact it often might take the form of a time of cool repose, silently waiting on the Lord.

I was once asked, "Why don't you have a question and answer period as part of your monthly scriptural catechesis in the cathedral?" I replied that I regularly have

such a period when I teach a class, or give a talk, but that public Lectio Divina is not catechesis but prayer, as much as the solemn Vespers that precedes it. The full, active, conscious participation of those who are present occurs not in some explicit way, such as is found in bible discussion groups or in a question and answer period with a speaker, but rather in the contemplation of the Biblical Word during the lengthy periods of silence which are found within the format of a public session of Lectio Divina. There is some parallel here to the personal engagement of the Christian in the Eucharistic liturgy; though sometimes that engagement takes the form of spoken words, or of actions, it reaches its most profound level in the silence of the heart. To participate actively, one need not always be talking or doing. The personal practice of Lectio Divina, using the daily Lectionary texts, is a most excellent way of preparing for the celebration of the Holy Eucharist.

The experience of Lectio Divina, whether in its private or public form, is intended to be an encounter with God in prayer through the repeated reading aloud of a small passage of the Bible. That experience is preceded and followed by prayer. I believe that the prayer of young Samuel in the temple is the most appropriate introduction to a period of Lectio Divina: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening." In Lectio Divina we seek not to master or to grasp the sacred text, but rather through it, prayerfully and silently, to come into the presence of God. We seek to be humbly attentive to God's Holy Word, to savour it, and to let it enter into our heart as much as into our heads, so that it may transform us.

Lectio Divina can be either public or private. Although I will be mainly describing a method for conducting public sessions of Lectio Divina, led by the local bishop in the Cathedral Church of the Diocese, I am aware that private time in Lectio Divina is more fundamental to our life in Christ, and it is my hope as I lead a public session once a month that this will encourage the participants to engage privately in this form of prayer every day. In a sense, when I am speaking in the presence of hundreds of people in the cathedral, and of many more who participate in Lectio Divina through television, or through watching the session on the internet or on a DVD, I am simply "turning up the volume" of my private Lectio Divina, as a kind of suggested example of the kind of prayer the participants might engage in at home. I hope that it will be beneficial for them to overhear some of my personal response to the inspired words, always conscious that the most important parts of a public session of Lectio Divina are the extended periods of silence, during which each person present can meditate upon the scriptural verse, while praying: "Speak, Lord; your servant is listening." Each person who is present brings to the encounter with the inspired Word his or her own current situation, and past history of sin and grace, and in so doing invites the Lord to speak personally, by name, as in the temple of old: "Samuel, Samuel!" And the young man replied: "Speak, Lord, your servant is listening."

When I became Archbishop of Edmonton I decided to invite the faithful to come to the Cathedral one Sunday a month, at seven in the evening, for a formal celebration of Vespers, followed by Lectio Divina. I have substantially followed the same pattern in Toronto. After I went to Rome to receive the pallium for Edmonton in June of 1999, I made a pilgrimage to Milan, mainly to pray at the tomb of one of my perso-

nal heroes, St Charles Borromeo, to ask his intercession that I might be a good and faithful archbishop. But I also spoke with some priests of Milan with whom I was staying, seeking to learn more about the sessions of Lectio Divina that I had heard that Cardinal Martini regularly conducted in the Cathedral of Milan. They mentioned that he did this at different times during the year, and I sensed that it was particularly designed as an encounter of the bishop with young people. That was not really what I had in mind, and I realized that each bishop needs to do what he judges to be most appropriate for his own local Church, using his own approach.

I also heard of a fascinating form of Lectio Divina, which I have not yet sought to introduce in my diocese, but which I would think would be most fruitful for young people. The priests described the Lectio Divina for young people led by a young priest whose name I do not recall, but who, I believe, they said was a graduate of the *Biblicum*. As I understand it, he would gather teenagers at a retreat center in the country, and first engage them in the study of a scriptural passage. After that, they would go into the Chapel, where the passage was written on large sheets of paper along the walls, and they would meditate upon it. I think the passage was read aloud. Then they would disperse to reflect individually concerning what the passage said to their head, heart, and hands: how it could lead them to know, love, and serve. Then they would return and read the passage again in the chapel, and perhaps discuss it. I mention this practice that I heard about ten years ago, aware that I may have confused some elements of it, because it seemed to me at the time to be an excellent idea, and it still does, though I have not adopted this approach to Lectio Divina.

Since becoming Archbishop of Toronto, I have become aware of a form of Lectio Divina practiced by the Neocatechumenal Way, since we have a *Redemptoris Mater* seminary attached to our Archdiocesan Seminary. I joined in this experience of Lectio Divina on only one occasion, and so am no expert on this method, but it seemed to be most admirable. In the context of Vespers the seminarians spent a lengthy period of silent meditation upon the Scriptural texts of the coming Sunday, using the references in the Jerusalem Bible to become familiar with the other scriptural passages that are related to the one being read. From time to time they would rise and silently ask God's guidance, or give thanks to God for light that had been received concerning the text. At the end of the period of silence, several of them were invited to share the fruits of their meditation upon the inspired Word. After that, the final part of Vespers was celebrated. This seemed to me to be an excellent form of Lectio Divina, and one that could be adapted fruitfully by anyone who wanted to prepare for the Liturgy of the Word of the coming Sunday. If more and more people did something like this, then each Sunday Eucharist would be celebrated with greater fruitfulness. It might be good for every parish to do something along these lines for those who wish to become more engaged in their faith.

I will now describe the way in which for the last 10 years I have conducted sessions of Lectio Divina in the cathedral.

Around May of each year I choose the 10 scriptural texts for the coming year's Lectio Divina. I find that a passage of about 15 verses is best for a 45 minute session. The texts are chosen according to some theme, and I ask the people who attend the sessions to offer suggestions. One year I divided the Sermon on the Mount into ten

sections. Another year there were ten psalms. In the year of St Paul I used ten Pauline texts. One year I chose the scriptural texts underlying the five luminous mysteries of the rosary, and then five texts relating to life in the Spirit. One year I chose biblical texts that illustrate the ten commandments. This year the *Lectio Divina* is on the Parables. I have thought of dedicating a year to one small book of the Bible, perhaps the letter of James.

The dates of the *Lectio* sessions are publicized with posters in the parishes and through the Archdiocesan Website, and through the Salt and Light Television network. I have found that it is best to choose one specific Sunday a month, so that people can plan ahead. Currently this is the second Sunday of the month, at 7pm in the Cathedral, from September to June.

In the week preceding the *Lectio Divina*, I sometimes briefly study the text, but only briefly, since if I prepare more thoroughly I will end up giving a class. I have been a Scripture Professor for many years, and I have nothing against scripture classes, but that is not *Lectio Divina*. One Sunday this past year I had prepared the wrong text, and discovered that only an hour before walking out into the Cathedral. I was able to spend the 30 minutes before the *Lectio* reading the correct text in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, as I always do, and my lack of further preparation did not seem to make much of a difference. That 30 minutes of prayer is usually the only immediate preparation, and intentionally so. Of course, my years of study at the *Biblicum* and the Gregorian University formed a valuable remote preparation for each session of *Lectio Divina*, as did the many years I have spent in studying, praying, and teaching the Word of God. As long as one is attentive to a constant development of remote preparation, year after year, then the immediate preparation for either preaching or *Lectio Divina* can be abbreviated.

At seven in the evening we begin solemn Vespers in the Cathedral. Whenever in Rome, I go to St Peter's at 5pm for Sunday Vespers, and am always moved by the solemnity of the prayer. The Vespers in my cathedral is obviously much, much, less formal and magnificent, but I believe that the solemn public celebration of the Liturgy of the Hours is important. This year I have introduced a new element: I have asked all the seminarians to attend the Vespers, and to lead the people in chanting the psalms.

After Vespers, which is finished by 7:30, I go to the sacristy and remove my vestments, and then return to the sanctuary. I do not consider *Lectio Divina* in the cathedral to be a solemn liturgical act (such as Vespers), but rather a personal encounter with the Word of God, and an occasion for me as bishop to join with my people in an intimate, prayerful experience of meditation. The goal, ultimately, is that each person will do this every day at home.

I stand at the front edge of the sanctuary, all wired up with one portable microphone for the cathedral and another for the television, and sometimes speak for a moment concerning the context of the passage. I use my old copy of the Revised Standard Version. It is bright red, because I believe that the Bible should be read. I make the Sign of the Cross, and invite the people to let go of their distractions so as to be attentive to the Word of God. I pray the Jesus Prayer, since our own sinfulness

is a barrier to hearing the Word of God. I pray the prayer of Samuel, "Speak, Lord; your servant is listening," and also "Come Holy Spirit, Fill the Hearts of your faithful", interspersing them with times of silence. After a few minutes I read the whole scriptural passage slowly, and ask the people to consider one thing which God is saying to them personally in that passage. Then I go through the text, section by section. It is like spiritual lasagna: a layer of silence, then a layer of text, then a layer of my own reflections ending with a question to consider regarding the personal application of the text, then a layer of silence, then a layer of text, and so on. After the last verse has been finished, I read the whole text again, slowly, and after a period of silence end with the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the doxology, and the Sign of the Cross. The whole Lectio Divina session lasts about 45 minutes, and so it is over by around 8:15pm.

All kinds of people attend the Lectio Divina, people of all ages. When I was in Edmonton I noticed that quite a few Protestants took part, including several Protestant ministers. When asked to speak to an evangelical Protestant youth group at the local university there, I led them in a session of Lectio Divina. I think they were surprised to find a Catholic bishop putting such stress on the Bible, and even more so to learn that Lectio Divina is an ancient tradition of the Catholic Church. At the Cathedral Lectio Divina sessions there are a fair number of young people, but it is not intended primarily for them.

In Edmonton a company audio-taped the sessions, and prepared video tapes and DVDs. Groups of people would gather in front of a television at various parishes in the week following the Sunday session and put the cassette into the machine and take part in the Lectio Divina in that way. I know that some people have reservations about televising the Eucharist, but Lectio Divina is perfectly suited to technological transmission of all kinds, since the essential elements are the listening to the Word of God and the silent reflection, and those can occur just as easily in front of a television as in the cathedral. In Toronto each session is professionally televised, and shown later on the local Salt and Light television network. The Archdiocese also puts the sessions on Youtube for those who want to take part through the Internet, and Salt and Light produces DVDs.

At the ordination of a bishop, the Book of the Gospels is held over the head of the newly ordained bishop during the prayer of consecration. I have often thought of that as signifying a fundamental dimension of the episcopal mission. As a bishop I am sent to preach the Gospel, and to assist those whom I serve to encounter the Word of God. By leading sessions of Lectio Divina in my cathedral I seek to fulfil my mission. But all Christians are called to encounter God through the inspired text, and it is my hope that the ancient practice of Lectio Divina will continue to be adapted in fruitful ways. Priests and religious have a special mandate to help others to enter more deeply into the sacred scriptures. Lay people will be strengthened in their mission of evangelizing the secular world through a personal experience of Lectio Divina. Those who are given the privilege of spending many years at the Biblical Institute, learning the languages of Scripture, and delving more deeply into the meaning of the Bible, are particularly called not only to teach the Word of God, but also to assist others to encounter God personally in the words of Scripture, in a spirit of

prayer. One way of doing that is through assisting people to engage in private and public experiences of Lectio Divina.

“Speak, Lord; your servant is listening.”