

CHAPTER 7

“Ears Thou Hast Dug for Me”

So, *lectio divina*.

A way of reading that guards against depersonalizing the text into an affair of questions and answers, definitions and dogmas. A way of reading that prevents us from turning Scripture on its head and using it to justify ourselves like that pathetic religion scholar was trying to do with Jesus. A way of reading that abandons the attempt to take control of the text as if it were helpless without our help. A way of reading that joins the company of Galilean women at the tomb as they abandon the spices and ointments with which they were going to take care of the Word made flesh, the Jesus they expected to find wrapped in grave clothes, and embrace the resurrection of that same Word and all the words brought to life in him. A way of reading that intends the fusion of the entire biblical story and my story. A way of reading that refuses to be reduced to *just* reading but intends the living of the text, listening and responding to the voices

of that “so great a cloud of witnesses” telling their stories, singing their songs, preaching their sermons, praying their prayers, asking their questions, having their children, burying their dead, following Jesus.

Lectio divina provides us with a discipline, developed and handed down by our ancestors, for recovering the context, restoring the intricate web of relationships to which the Scriptures give witness but that are so easily lost or obscured in the act of writing.

It is time to deal with the details. What exactly is involved? How do we go about this?

Lectio divina comprises four elements: *lectio* (we read the text), *meditatio* (we meditate the text), *oratio* (we pray the text), and *contemplatio* (we live the text). But naming the four elements must be accompanied by a practiced awareness that their relationship is not sequential. Reading (*lectio*) is a linear act, but spiritual (*divina*) reading is not — any of the elements may be at the fore at any one time. There is a certain natural progression from one to another, but after separating them in order to understand them we find that in actual practice they are not four discrete items that we engage in one after another in stair-step fashion. Rather than linear the process is more like a looping spiral in which all four elements are repeated, but in various sequences and configurations. What we are after is *noticing*, seeing the interplay — elements not marching in precise formation but one calling forth another and then receding to give place to another,

none in isolation from the others but thrown together in a kind of playful folk dance. They are like sodium and chlorine, very dangerous, lethal even, in isolation but as a compound, sodium chloride, table salt, bringing life to otherwise bland foods. Each of the elements must be taken seriously; none of the elements may be eliminated; none of the elements can be practiced in isolation from the others. In the actual practice of *lectio divina* the four elements fuse, interpenetrate. *Lectio divina* is a way of reading that becomes a way of living.¹

I want to re-say what our Christian companions have been saying in a variety of ways for two millennia, with a few modifications that fit them into our present context.

An arresting phrase in Psalm 40:6 serves admirably as a metaphor for *lectio divina*: אַזנַיִם קָרִיתָ לִּי, literally, “ears thou hast dug for me.” Translators routinely but timidly paraphrase: “thou hast given me an open ear” (RSV); “my ears you have pierced” (NIV); “mine ears thou hast opened” (KJV). But the psalms poet was bold to imagine God swinging a pickax, digging ears in our granite blockheads so that we can hear, really hear, what he speaks to us.

The primary organ for receiving God’s revelation is not the eye that sees but the ear that hears — which means that all of our reading of Scripture must develop into a hearing of the word of God.

Print technology — a wonderful thing, in itself —

has put millions and millions of Bibles in our hands, but unless these Bibles are embedded in the context of a personally speaking God and a prayerfully listening community, we who handle these Bibles are at special risk. If we reduce the Bible to a tool to be used, the tool builds up calluses on our hearts.

Lectio

Reading may seem to be the first thing, but it is not. Reading is always preceded by hearing and speaking. Language is essentially oral. We learn our language not from a book, not from a person writing words, but from a person speaking them. The written word has the potential to resurrect the speaking voice and listening ear, but it does not insist upon it. The word can just sit there on the page and be analyzed or admired or ignored. Just because we have read it doesn’t mean we have heard it.

The written word is also clearer than the spoken word. Language, as we speak and hear it, is very ambiguous. We miss a lot, we misunderstand a lot. No matter how logically and plainly things are said, the listener quite often doesn’t get it right. Conversely, no matter how attentive and knowledgeable the listener, the speaker often doesn’t say it right. We proceed, as T. S. Eliot once put it, by “hints followed by guesses.”² Just because we have looked up the word in our dictionary and have carefully cross-referenced it doesn’t

guarantee that we have listened to and heard the voice of the living God.

I sometimes marvel that God chose to risk his revelation in the ambiguities of language. If he had wanted to make sure that the truth was absolutely clear, without any possibility of misunderstanding, he should have revealed his truth by means of mathematics. Mathematics is the most precise, unambiguous language that we have. But then, of course, you can't say "I love you" in algebra.

So it is important to not assume too much. It is important to listen to the counsel of our Christian brothers or sisters, who place an open Bible before us and tell us, "Read. Read only what is here, but also be sure that you read it the way that it is here." *Lectio*.

The place to begin, though, is not, as is often supposed, with a grammar and a dictionary. The fixity of the words on paper, removed from the nuances and ambiguities of the living voice, gives an illusion of preciseness and seems to invite a matching preciseness in the reader. We do better to begin with a consideration of metaphor, the most distinctive feature of language as we use it and a feature that is likewise prominent in Scripture. If we don't understand how metaphor works we will misunderstand most of what we read in the Bible. No matter how carefully we parse our Hebrew and Greek sentences, no matter how precisely we use our dictionaries and trace our etymologies, no matter how exactly we define the words on

the page, if we do not appreciate the way a metaphor works we will never comprehend the meaning of the text.

Despite the frequency and prominence of metaphor in language, understanding its dynamics is not as easy as we might suppose, particularly when we come upon metaphor as readers instead of hearers, for the word on the page gives the impression of being literal, composed as it is of letters fixed on the page in indelible ink. And of being unchanging — if we return to a page that we left off reading three days ago and re-read it, it is exactly the same as when we left it. That cannot be said of a voiced conversation.

The difficulty is compounded for most Bible readers because there is the assumption that what we are reading is the "word of God," which means that it absolutely must be taken seriously. But "seriously" in our present-day reading culture very often means literally. Science provides the standard by which we judge truth. Truth is what can be verified under laboratory conditions. Truth is what is empirically true — with things it is what we can test and probe, measure and weigh; with language it is what can survive strenuous logical analysis. It is what we often refer to as "literal."

Metaphor is a form of language that cannot pass such logical scrutiny, cannot make it through the laboratory tests. Unfortunately (or fortunately, as it turns out) the Bible is chock full of metaphor, which means that if we assume that "literal" is the only

means to “serious” we are going to be in trouble much of the time. For a metaphor is literally a lie.

A metaphor states as true something that is literally not true. For instance, “God is a rock,” a frequent Hebrew assertion about God (“The LORD is my rock.... [W]ho is a rock, except our God?” Ps. 18:2, 31). If we take the sentence literally, instead of going to church on Sunday mornings to worship we will visit the local stone quarry and shop for a god rock that we can erect in our backyard. The alternative is to dismiss the sentence as meaningless, which would leave us with a Bible with every other sentence or so deleted, including some of our most prized: the Lord is my shepherd (Ps. 23:1); the Lord is a warrior (Exod. 15:3); I am a rose of Sharon (Song 2:1); I am the true vine (John 15:1).

Sandra Schneiders expertly characterizes metaphor as language that “contains an ‘is’ and an ‘is not,’ held in irresolvable tension.”³ The tension is inherently uncomfortable and administers a kind of shock treatment to the mind, stimulating it to a deeper involvement than what can be accounted for by a literal surface reading. If we suppress the “is” we kill the metaphor and end up with a mummified corpse of its meaning. If we suppress the “is not” we literalize the metaphor and end up with a junkyard of wrecked and rusted-out words.

The metaphor treated literally is simply absurd. But if we let it have its way with us, it pushes us to clarity at a different level. Take, for instance, the

metaphors piled up in Psalm 114:

The sea looked and fled,
Jordan turned back.
The mountains skipped like rams,
the hills like lambs. (vv. 3-4)

It doesn’t take us long to realize that this is an account of the exodus: “The sea looked and fled.” In the sober language of prose, this is the story of Israel. Fleeing from the Egyptians and then blocked at the waters of the Red Sea, the people walked through on dry land after Moses struck the waters with his staff and the waters parted. God provided a way of escape. “Jordan turned back” remembers Israel’s being prevented from entering the Promised Land at the conclusion of her forty years’ wilderness trek by the formidable Jordan River. Then Joshua struck the waters with his staff, the river parted, and the people marched through and began their conquest of the land. God provided a way of victory. In the prose of the book of Exodus, “the mountains skipped like rams, the hills like lambs” is the story of the long wait of the people at the base of Sinai in awe before the volcanic-rumbling and earthquake-shaken mountain while Moses was on the heights receiving the law.

So, why not say it plainly? Tell it to us straight? Denise Levertov in her poem “Poetics of Faith” tells us why:

“Straight to the point”

can ricochet,
 unconvincing,
 circumlocution, analogy,
 parables, ambiguities, provide
 context, stepping-stones.⁴

For one thing, God's action and presence among us is so beyond our comprehension that sober description and accurate definition are no longer functional. The levels of reality here are so beyond us that they compel extravagance of language. But the language, though extravagant, is not exaggerated. All language, but especially language that deals with transcendence, with God, is inadequate and falls short. The metaphor of the Red Sea as a fleeing jackal, the Jordan as a cowardly sentinel forsaking his post, the transformation of Sinai into frolicking rams and lambs is not, of course, a journalistic account of what happened, but neither is it the fabrication of an unhinged imagination. It is a writer of God's revelation giving witness to salvation. The somersaulting of what everyone had assumed to be the limitations of reality (Red Sea and Jordan River) and the unexpected outpouring of energy from a huge, dead, granite outcropping in the dead desert (Sinai) called for metaphor.

This is an instance of what poet Wallace Stevens, himself a master of metaphor, called "a motive for metaphor."⁵ By means of metaphor we see far more than discrete *things*, we perceive everything

in dynamic tension and relationship with everything else. The raw stuff of the world is not matter but energy. How do we express this interconnected vitality? We use metaphor.

A metaphor is a word that bears a meaning beyond its naming function; the "beyond" extends and brightens our comprehension rather than confusing it. Just as the language of ecology demonstrates the interconnectedness of all *things* (air, water, soil, persons, birds, and so forth), the language of metaphor demonstrates the interconnectedness of all *words*. The historical word (exodus), the geological word (hills), and the animal word (ram) all have to do with every other word.

Meanings interconnect. Nothing can be understood in isolation, pinned down under a microscope; no *word* can be understood by merely locating it in a dictionary. From the moment we speak, we are drawn into the total web of all language that has ever been spoken. One word draws us into surprising relationships with another, and then another, and then another. And that is why metaphor holds such a prominent place in Scripture, in which everything is in movement, finding its place in relation to the word that God speaks.

Wendell Berry says this well: "The earth is not dead like the concept of property, but is as vividly and intricately alive as a man or a woman and ... there is a delicate interdependence between its life and our own."⁶ And so the metaphorical statement "the mountains

skip like rams” is not mere illustration to portray the exuberance of the Sinai revelation; it is a penetrating realization that the earth itself responds to and participates in that revelation. Paul used a different, though just as striking, metaphor for the action: “We know that the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves” (Rom. 8:22-23). Metaphor does not explain; it does not define; it draws us away from being outsiders into being insiders, involved with all reality spoken into being by God’s word.

Language is debased when it uses metaphor as decoration to cover scrawny thoughts, putting lace cuffs on bare-wristed prose. In actual fact, metaphorical language is not what we learn to use after we have mastered the rudiments of plain speech, it is prior to descriptive language — infants and poets are our exemplars.

Metaphor sends out tentacles of connectedness. As we find ourselves in the tumble and tangle of metaphors in Scripture we realize that we are not schoolboys and schoolgirls reading about God, gathering information or “doctrine” that we can study and use; we are residents in a home interpenetrated by spirit — God’s Spirit, my spirit, your spirit. The metaphor makes us part of what we know. Each word draws us closer to where words come from: the creative word that makes mountains and rams, hills and lambs, Israel and Judah, Jacob and Christ, me and you. The word, and most conspicuously the metaphor, sig-

nals transcendence and encounter with the One who speaks everything into being.

This is the kind of reading upon which Scripture, profligate as it is with metaphor, insists.

Meditatio

Plato, writing at the moment when a primarily oral culture was giving way to writing, made the astute observation that writing was going to debilitate memory. Ivan Illich characterizes him as “the first uneasy man of letters,” for Plato observed how his students’ reliance on silent, passive texts narrowed the stream of their remembrance, making it shallow and dull.⁷ When words were primarily exchanged by means of voices and ears, language was living and kept alive in acts of speaking and listening. But the moment that words were written, memory was bound to atrophy — we would no longer have to remember what was said; we could look it up in a book. Books rob us of the right and pleasure of answering back. He made his observation by telling a story that we can now “look up” in his book, *Phaedrus*.⁸

Here’s the story. In Egypt there was a god by the name of Thoth. He was the inventor of many things, but his proudest invention was the letters that make writing possible. One day he was more or less showing off, bragging of his accomplishment before King Thamus, telling him that this would make the Egyp-

tians wiser and give them better memories. King Thamus would have none of it. He said that it would ruin their memories, that it would have much more to do with forgetting than remembering, that they would have the show of words without the reality. Plato has Socrates comment on the story by comparing writing to painting. The figures in the landscape of the painter have “an attitude of life and yet if you ask them a question they preserve a solemn silence.” Similarly, with writing, “put a question and they give the same unvarying answer.” Once the words have been “written down they are tumbled about anywhere among those who may or may not understand them, and know not to whom they should reply, to whom not: and, if they are maltreated or abused, they have no parent to protect them; and they cannot protect or defend themselves.” Socrates, who, like Jesus, never wrote anything, prefers a “living word which has a soul ... graven in the soul of the learner, which can defend itself, and knows when to speak and when to be silent.”

Northrop Frye summarizes Plato’s concern this way: “The ability to record has a lot more to do with forgetting than with remembering: with keeping the past in the past, instead of continuously recreating it in the present.”⁹

Meditatio is the discipline we give to keeping the memory active in the act of reading. Meditation moves from looking at the *words* of the text to en-

tering the *world* of the text. As we take this text into ourselves, we find that the text is taking us into itself. For the world of the text is far larger and more real than our minds and experience. The biblical text is a witness to God revealing himself. This revelation is not simply a series of random oracles that illuminate momentary obscurities or guide us through perplexing circumstances. This text is *God-revealing*: God creating, God saving, God blessing. The text has a context and the context is huge, massive, comprehensive. St. Paul is staggered by it: “O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (Rom. 11:33).

This world of revelation is not only large, it is coherent — everything is connected as in a living organism. A living God is revealing himself, and so if we are going to get it at all we must enter the large livingness of it. Meditation rehearses this largeness, enters into what is there, re-remembering all the aspects that have been dismembered in our disobedience, noticing the connections, realizing the congruences, picking up the echoes. There is always more to anything, any word or sentence, than meets the eye; meditation enters into the large backgrounds that are not immediately visible, that we overlooked the first time around.

Meditation is the aspect of spiritual reading that trains us to read Scripture as a connected, coherent whole, not a collection of inspired bits and pieces.

In pagan antiquity there was a popular story about a woman who uttered divine oracles. Her name was Sibyl, and she was a prophetess from the Greek village of Cumae. She is first mentioned by Heraclitus in 500 B.C. I've always imagined her as an old crone with unfocused eyes and wild hair, sitting at the entrance to a cave stirring a kettle of foul-smelling brew and muttering sacred wisdom in a syntax that is familiar to us from fortune cookies. She got something started in Cumae that continued: "sibyls" kept showing up in various times and places, making oracular pronouncements in throaty voices that men and women took as divine counsel. Later Jewish and Christian "sibyls" got in on the act. People started collecting the oracles and putting them in a book. The collections grew and by the fourth century A.D. there were fifteen books of Sibylline Oracles, some of which a considerable number of Christians took quite seriously.¹⁰

Sibyl and her imitators were a ready source for divine counsel, providing wisdom and direction to confused men and women. The usual process was to enter a cave where the sibyl was stationed and listen to her muttered sounds. At times shrines were built at these sites. The sounds were cryptic, often apparent gibberish, but it was inspired gibberish and therefore highly prized as wisdom — truth from the source of truth. The oracles were without context, guttural or wheezy fragments of sound from the gods. But that was the great attraction. The oracles were the word of god coming to you without syntax or context — you

were free to supply those incidentals yourself.

What is surprising today is how many people treat the Bible as a collection of Sibylline Oracles, verses or phrases without context or connections. This is nothing less than astonishing. The Scriptures are the revelation of a personal, relational, incarnational God to actual communities of men and women with names in history. The witnesses to the revelation are real writers who do their writing and witnessing in the full light of day and with the confirmation of their worshipping communities. Everything is out in the open. This is no muttering in a dark Aegean cave but the Holy Spirit operating under an open sky, bringing about legible, coherent writing that has continuities from generation to generation, a narrative with plot and characters and scenery.

The practice of dividing the Bible into numbered chapters and verses has abetted this "sibylline complex." It gives the impression that the Bible is a collection of thousands of self-contained sentences and phrases that can be picked out or combined arbitrarily in order to discern our fortunes or fates. But Bible verses are not fortune cookies to be broken open at random. And the Bible is not an astrological chart to be impersonally manipulated for amusement or profit.

Meditation is the primary way in which we guard against the fragmentation of our Scripture reading into isolated oracles. Meditation enters into the co-

herent universe of God's revelation. Meditation is the prayerful employ of imagination in order to become friends with the text. It must not be confused with fancy or fantasy.

Meditation doesn't make things up. We are wedded to a historic faith and are rightly wary of the intrusion of human invention. But meditation is not intrusion, it is rumination — letting the images and stories of the entire revelation penetrate our understanding. By meditation we make ourselves at home and conversant with everyone in the story, entering the place where Moses and Elijah and Jesus converse together. Participation is necessary. Meditation is participation.

I like Warren Wiersbe's distinction between fancy and imagination: "Fancy wrote 'Mary had a little lamb' but inspired imagination wrote 'The Lord is my Shepherd.' Fancy creates a new world for you; imagination gives you insight into the old world."¹¹

No text can be understood out of its entire context. The most "entire" context is Jesus. Every biblical text must be read in the living presence of Jesus. Every word of the scriptural text is a window or door leading us out of the tarpaper shacks of self into this great outdoors of God's revelation in sky and ocean, tree and flower, Isaiah and Mary, and, finally and completely, Jesus. Meditation discerns the connections and listens for the harmonies that come together in Jesus.

We meditate to become empathetic with the text. We move from being critical outsiders to becoming

appreciative insiders. The text is no longer something to be looked at with cool and detached expertise but something to be entered into with the playful curiosity of a child.

G. K. Chesterton's fictional Father Brown shows us how it is done. Nearing the conclusion of his colorful career as a sleuth in priest's clothing, having solved many intricate and complex criminal cases, he is talking with some friends while sitting around a late-night fireplace in a friend's home in the mountains of Spain. One of the friends asks him the secret to his many successes in solving crimes. Blinking his big expressionless eyes behind the little round glasses, he blandly replies, "You see, it was I who killed all those people." Everyone gasps, staring with appalled astonishment at the timid, mousy priest. Then he goes on, "I had thought out exactly how a thing like that could be done, and in what style or state of mind a man could really do it. And when I was quite sure that I felt exactly like the murderer himself, of course I knew who he was."¹²

Oratio

There is more. There is prayer — *oratio*. "Bible searching and searching prayer go hand in hand. What we receive from God in the Book's message we return to Him with interest in prayer," writes P. T. Forsyth.¹³ Spiritual reading requires a disciplined attention to

exactly the way the text is written; it requires a meditative and receptive entering into the world of the text; and it requires response. We read and enter and before long we, in some surprise, say, “Oh, this has to do with *me!* God’s word is addressed to me — I’m the one spoken to!” It is one thing to be listening to God speak to Moses on the austere crags of Mount Sinai or listening to Jesus preach the Beatitudes on a grassy Galilean hillside, thrilling to the truth, admiring the majesty. It’s quite another thing entirely to realize that God is speaking to me bicycling in the rain down a country road in Kentucky. I’m speechless; or I stutter. How do I answer God? But answer I do, for the text requires it.

Prayer is language used in relation to God. It is the most universal of all languages, the *lingua franca* of the human heart. Prayer ranges from “sighs too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26) to petitions and thanksgivings composed in lyric poetry and stately prose to “psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (Col. 3:16) to the silence of a person present to God in attentive adoration (Ps. 62:1).

The foundational presupposition of all prayer is that God reveals himself personally by means of language. The word of God is not placarded on a billboard, an impersonal notice posted to call our attention to something that God once said or did, while we are driving down the road to somewhere else. God creates the cosmos with words; he creates us with words;

he calls to us, speaks to us, whispers to us using words. Then he gives us, his human creatures, the gift of language; we not only can hear and understand God as he speaks to us, we can speak to him — respond, answer, converse, argue, question. We can pray. God is the initiator and guarantor of language both ways, as God speaks to us, as we speak to God. It is a wonder that God speaks to us; it is hardly less a wonder that God listens to us. The biblical revelation is equally insistent on both counts: the efficacy of God’s language to us, the efficacy of our language to God. Our listening to God is an on-again, off-again affair; God always listens to us. The essential reality of prayer is that its source and character are entirely in God. We are most ourselves when we pray. But prayer is not a human-based activity. Psychology doesn’t get us very far in either understanding or practicing prayer. Whether we are aware of it or not (and often we are not), it begins and ends and has its being in the company of the Trinity.

The Scriptures, read and prayed, are our primary and normative access to God as he reveals himself to us. The Scriptures are our listening post for learning the language of the soul, the ways God speaks to us; they also provide the vocabulary and grammar that are appropriate for us as we in our turn speak to God. Prayer detached from Scripture, from listening to God, disconnected from God’s words to us, short-circuits the relational language that is prayer. Christians acquire this personal and relational practice of

prayer primarily (although not exclusively) under the shaping influence of the Psalms and Jesus.

The Psalms are the preeminent witness to our praying participation as we read or listen to God's word. Athanasius caught their genius succinctly when he said, "Most scriptures speak *to* us; the Psalms speak *for* us." And oh, how they speak. They don't simply say, "Yes, God, I agree. Yes that's right, I couldn't have said it better myself." Or, "Yes, would you say that again so I can write it down and show it to my friends." No, they argue and complain, they lament and they praise, they deny and declaim, they thank and they sing. On one page they accuse God of betraying and abandoning them and on the next they turn cart-wheels of hallelujahs. Sometimes we suppose that the proper posture of response to God as we read the Bible is to be curled up in a wingback chair before a cozy fire, docile and well-mannered. Some of us are taught to think that reading the Bible means sitting in God's classroom and that prayer is politely raising our hand when we have a question about what he is teaching us in his Deuteronomy lecture. The Psalms, our prayer text within the biblical text, show us something quite different: prayer is *engaging* God, an engaging that is seldom accomplished by a murmured greeting and a conventional handshake. The engagement, at least in its initial stages, is more like a quarrel than a greeting, more like a wrestling match than a warm embrace.¹⁴

And how could it be otherwise? This world, this

reality, revealed by God speaking to us, is not the kind of world to which we are accustomed. It is not a neat and tidy world in which we are in control — there is mystery everywhere that takes considerable getting used to, and until we do it scares us. It is not a predictable, cause-effect world in which we can plan our careers and secure our futures — there is miracle everywhere that upsets us no end, except for the occasions when the miracle is in our favor. It is not a dream world in which everything works out according to our adolescent expectations — there is suffering and poverty and abuse at which we cry out in pain and indignation, "You can't let this happen!" For most of us it takes years and years and years to exchange our dream world for the real world of grace and mercy, sacrifice and love, freedom and joy.

Using the Psalms as a school of prayer, praying these prayers we get a feel for what is appropriate to say as we bring our lives into attentive and worshiping response to God as he speaks to us. As we do this, the first thing we realize is that in prayer anything goes. Virtually everything human is appropriate as material for prayer: reflections and observations, fear and anger, guilt and sin, questions and doubts, needs and desires, praise and gratitude, suffering and death. Nothing human is excluded. The Psalms are an extended refutation that prayer is "being nice" before God. No — prayer is an offering of ourselves, just as we are. The second thing we realize is that prayer is access to everything that God is for us: holiness, just-

ice, mercy, forgiveness, sovereignty, blessing, vindication, salvation, love, majesty, glory. The Psalms are a detailed demonstration that prayer brings us into the welcoming presence of God as he generously offers himself, just as he is, to us.

Luther, in his preface to the German Psalter (1528), wrote,

if you want to see the holy Christian Church painted in glowing colors and in a form which is really alive, and if you want this to be done in a miniature, you must get hold of the Psalter, and there you will have in your possession a fine, clear, pure mirror which will show you what Christianity really is; yea, you will find yourself in it and the true *gnothi seauton* ["know thyself"], and God himself and all his creatures, too.¹⁵

If the Psalms are our primary text for prayer, our answering speech to the word of God, then Jesus, the Word made flesh, is our primary teacher. Jesus is the divine/human personal center for a life of prayer. Jesus prays for us — “he always lives to make intercession for [us]” (Heb. 7:25). The verb is in the present tense. This is the most important thing to know about prayer, not that we should pray or how we should pray but that Jesus is right now praying for us (see also Heb. 4:16 and John 17). Jesus, the Word that made us (John 1:3; Col. 1:16), is also among us to teach us to direct our words personally to God. Mostly he did this by example; Luke cites nine instances: 5:16; 6:12; 9:18, 28; 11:1; 22:31, 41, 44; 24:30. But we have

only a slim accounting of his actual prayers. Some are inarticulate (Mark 7:34; 8:12; John 11:33; Heb. 5:7). Some are quoted verbatim (Matt. 11:25; 26:39; 27:46; Luke 23:46; John 11:41; 12:27-28; 17:1-26).

The single instance in which Jesus instructed us in prayer was in response to the disciples’ request, “Lord, teach us to pray...” (Luke 11:1). His answer, “When you pray, say...,” our so-called Lord’s Prayer (Luke 11:2-4 and Matt. 6:9-13), is the church’s primary text (backed up by the Psalms) for guiding Christians into a life of personal, honest, and mature prayer. The simplicity and brevity of Jesus’ first (and only!) lesson in prayer is striking, a standing rebuke against all attempts to develop techniques of prayer or to discover the “secret” of prayer. Prayer as Jesus practiced and taught it was not a verbal tool for working on God, not an insider formula for getting our way with God.

Prayer is shaped by Jesus, in whose name we pray. Our knowledge, our needs, our feelings are taken seriously, but they are not foundational. God, revealed in the Scriptures that we read and meditate upon and in Jesus whom we address, gives both form and content to our prayers. In prayer we are most ourselves; it is the one act in which we can, *must*, be totally ourselves. But it is also the act in which we move beyond ourselves. In that “move beyond” we come to be formed and defined not by the sum total of our experiences but by the Father, Son, and Spirit to whom and by whom we pray.

God does not make speeches; he enters conversations and we are partners to the conversation. We enter the syntax, the grammar of the word of God. We are not the largest part. We do not supply the verbs and nouns. But we are without question in it. We provide a preposition here, a conjunction there, an occasional enclitic or proclitic, once in awhile an adverb or adjective. Often it's only a semicolon or comma, an exclamation point or question mark. But we are *part* of the syntax, not external to it. The text assumes that we are participants in what is written, not accidental drop-ins, not hit or miss bystanders, not an addendum or footnote. By its very nature language connects; it is dialogic; it creates conversation.¹⁶ Prayer is our entrance into the grammar of revelation, the grammar of the word of God.

The world revealed by God's word is so much larger than our sin-conditioned world that we can't be expected to grasp it all at once. The world revealed by God's word has so much more to it, in it, and behind it than our ego-centered world that we can't be expected to understand it all at once. But God is patient with us. That is why we *pray* what we read. Prayer is the way we work our way out of the comfortable but cramped world of self into the self-denying but spacious world of God. It's getting rid of self so that we can be all soul — God-aware, God-dimensioned.

Reality as God reveals it to us by his word in Jesus is strange and unexpected and disappointing. This is not the kind of world we would have created if we

had been given the assignment; this is not the kind of salvation we would have arranged if we had been on the committee; this is not the system of rewards and punishments we would have legislated if we had had the vote. I love the audacious quip of Teresa of Avila when she was energetically engaged in reforming the Carmelite monasteries, traveling all over Spain by ox-cart on bad roads. One day she was thrown from her cart into a muddy stream. She shook her fist at God, "God, if this is the way you treat your friends, no wonder you don't have many."¹⁷

That's right. The reality that God reveals to us in his word is very different, quite other — Other! — than anything we could ever have dreamed up. And thank goodness, for if we keep at this long enough, prayer by prayer, we find ourselves living in a reality that is far larger, far lovelier, far better. But it takes considerable getting used to. Prayer is the process of getting used to it, going from the small to the large, from control to mystery, from self to soul — to God.

It is not easy. It was not easy for Jesus those nights on the mountain, that night in Gethsemane, those hours on the cross. Nobody ever said it would be easy. God didn't say it would be easy. But it's the way things are — this is the way the world is, the way we are, the way God is. Do you want to live in the real world? This is it. God doesn't reveal it to us by his word only so that we can *know* about it, he continues the revelation in us as we pray and participate in it.

The necessity for sturdy and ready responsiveness to the Spirit as we read the text is on display in a diary entry by Julian Green for October 6, 1941:

The story of the manna gathered and set aside by the Hebrews is deeply significant. It so happened that the manna rotted when it was kept. And perhaps this means that all spiritual reading which is not consumed — by prayer and by works — ends by causing a sort of rotting inside us. You die with a head full of fine sayings and a perfectly empty heart.¹⁸

We are well warned: it is not enough to understand the Bible, or admire it. God has spoken; now it's our move. We *pray* what we read, working our lives into active participation in what God reveals in the word. God does not expect us to take this new reality lying down. We'd better *not* take it lying down, for God intends that this word get us on our feet walking, running, singing.

God doesn't make us do any of this: God's word is personal address, inviting, commanding, challenging, rebuking, judging, comforting, directing. But not forcing. Not coercing. We are given space and freedom to answer, to enter into the conversation. From beginning to end, the word of God is a dialogical word, a word that invites participation. Prayer is our participation in the creation, salvation, and community that God reveals to us in Holy Scripture.

Contemplatio

The final and completing element in *lectio divina* is contemplation. Contemplation in the schema of *lectio divina* means living the read/meditated/prayed text in the everyday, ordinary world. It means getting the text into our muscles and bones, our oxygen-breathing lungs and blood-pumping heart. But if we are going to use the word in this comprehensive and everyday way, we need first to free it from its stereotyped meaning. The common American stereotype of contemplation is that it is what monks and nuns do in monasteries and convents. Serious contemplation involves leaving the world of family and domesticity, of city and business, taking vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience in order to live in quiet prayerfulness and reflective study, undistracted in the presence of God. Historically, the word is rightly used in referring to such lives, but not *only* to such lives. Even though for fifteen hundred years and more, many, maybe most, of the men and women who used the word “contemplation” lived in such settings, there is nothing in the practice itself that requires a vowed life of seclusion from the “world.” Still, it is hard to free our imaginations from the extensive associations derived from the writings of the desert fathers and mothers in Egypt, Teresa of Avila in her Carmelite convent in Spain, Benedict and his monks in the monastery at Monte Cassino, Hildegard leading her nuns in the convent she founded at Bingen (Germany), Bernard

preaching to his monks at Clairvaux, or, in our day, Thomas Merton with the Trappists in Kentucky. In these contexts the contemplative life is almost always set in contrast to the active life, which is understood as life outside the monastery and convent. Hans Urs von Balthasar, the Roman Catholic theologian who gave a lifetime to the study and practice of the contemplative life, does his best to counter the falsifying stereotype by naming contemplation as a “link” which ties worship in the sanctuary and work in the world in a bundle that is at once secular and sacred: “The life of contemplation is perforce an everyday life, of small fidelities and services performed in the spirit of love, which lightens our tasks and gives to them its warmth.”¹⁹

I have no argument with or criticism of the contemplation that is practiced in the monasteries; in fact, I am endlessly grateful for the men and women who gave (and continue to give!) themselves to such disciplined attentiveness to our Lord. But I am also determined to do what I can to get the term “contemplation” into circulation in the world of the everyday, what Kathleen Norris calls “The quotidian mysteries: laundry, liturgy and ‘women’s work.’” She writes,

I have come to believe that the true mystics of the quotidian are not those who contemplate holiness in isolation, reaching godlike illumination in serene silence, but those who manage to find God in a life filled with noise, the demands of other people and relentless daily duties that can consume the self. They may be young parents

juggling child-rearing and making a living.... [I]f they are wise, they treasure the rare moments of solitude and silence that come their way, and use them not to escape, to distract themselves with television and the like. Instead, they listen for a sign of God’s presence and they open their hearts toward prayer.²⁰

I stake my claim for the democratization of contemplation on the observation that virtually all children up to the age of three to five years are natural contemplatives: unself-consciously present to the immediate flower, absorbed and oblivious while watching an ant track its way across a log.

Denise Levertov, writing as a poet, understands contemplation as native ground for all who take words seriously by calling attention to the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of contemplation as coming from “*templum*, temple, a place for observation, marked out by the augur.” It means, she says, “not simply to observe, to regard, but to do these things *in the presence of a god*.”²¹ It means becoming aware of the total surrounding context — reflecting on human presence in a divine atmosphere. The lexical territory in which Levertov stakes her claim is poetry — she is a poet working with words. As a reader working with the words of Scripture, I am likewise determined to recover the words of Scripture as a *templum*, and then live these words that I read “in the presence of a god,” in my case the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.²²

If *lectio divina* is to have currency in the Christian community today, contemplation simply must be reclaimed as essential in all reading and living of Scripture. It is not an option; it is necessary. The word's very strangeness and remoteness from the ordinary may even be an advantage in recovering its distinctive punch: it administers a verbal jolt to our ears, surprising us out of our hurried, harried, self-defeating addictions to what we have become used to calling fulfillment and the pursuit of happiness — our American culture's emasculated version of heaven. As such it functions nicely as a protest word against so much of what is held up for admiration and emulation among us: spiritual technology, psychological manipulation, institutionalized control, sanctioned addictions, evangelical hurry, messianic violence, pious indulgence.

Contemplation means submitting to the biblical revelation, taking it within ourselves, and then living it unpretentiously, without fanfare. It doesn't mean (and these are the stereotyped misunderstandings) quiet, withdrawn, secluded, serene, or benign. It has nothing to do with whether we spend our days as a grease monkey under an automobile or on our knees in a Benedictine choir. It doesn't mean "having it all together." It doesn't mean being emotionally and mentally well-balanced.

Contemplatives fly off the handle, make bad judgments, speak out mistakenly and regret their words, run stoplights and get speeding tickets. Contempla-

tives get depressed, get confused, get fat, get lost, and sometimes don't get it at all. "Contemplative" is not a term of achievement. It is not a badge of merit.

Contemplative is a designation that any one of us can accept for ourselves and one that we all should. We will never read and live the Bible rightly if we don't. *Lectio divina* anticipates and assumes contemplation. If it makes us feel better to attach the adjective "failed" I have no objection. Failed contemplative. All contemplatives are failed contemplatives. But the word itself, whether as adjective or noun, stands: contemplative.

Contemplation means living what we read, not wasting any of it or hoarding any of it, but using it up in living. It is life formed by God's revealing word, God's word read and heard, meditated and prayed. The contemplative life is not a special kind of life; it is the Christian life, nothing more but also nothing less. But *lived*. Joseph Conrad captured the essence of the contemplative life when he called attention to

that part of our being which is a gift, not an acquisition, to the capacity for delight and wonder ... our sense of pity and pain, to the latent feeling of fellowship with all creation — and to the subtle but invincible conviction of solidarity that knits together the loneliness of innumerable hearts ... which binds together all humanity — the dead to the living and the living to the unborn.²³

Contemplative is not an elitist category of Christian. The importance of rehabilitating the word is that our culture has taken to using “Christian” to refer to virtually anybody who is not a communist or a criminal. We need an unpopular word that kicks off some awareness of what is odd in those who live by faith in Jesus Christ, a verbal tool that calls attention to what is distinctive in this word-of-God-formed life. Maybe the awkwardness of this word in the climate of this age will signpost resistance to the acids of secularism that erode the sharp edges of our identity in Christ.

Contemplative in the context of *lectio divina*, our spiritual reading of the Holy Scriptures, signals a recognition of an organic union between the word “read” and the word “lived.” The contemplative life is the realization that the Word that was in the beginning is also the Word made flesh and continues to be the Word to which I say, *Fiat mihi*: “Let it be to *me* according to thy Word.”

The assumption underlying contemplation is that Word and Life are at root the same thing. Life originates in Word. Word makes Life. There is no word of God that God does not intend to be lived by us. All words are capable of being incarnated, because all words originate in the Word made flesh.

All words are likewise capable of dis-carnation, of not conceiving life in our flesh and blood, of being turned into lies. The Devil, according to some of our best teachers, is discarnate — incapable of getting into flesh, into life. The Devil’s only way of getting into the

world’s affairs is by using us as “carriers.” The Devil needs human flesh to do his work. Because the Devil is completely otherworldly, so un *Wordly*, he has no capacity for “on earth as it is in Hell” except as we flesh and blood people speak his lies and act out his illusions.

The refusal, whether intentional or inadvertent, to embrace the contemplative life leaves us exposed to becoming carriers of the Devil’s lies, disincarnating God’s words in the very act of blithely and piously quoting Holy Scripture. For every word of God revealed and read in the Bible is there to be conceived and born in us: Christ, the Word made flesh, made flesh in our flesh.

A word is not something spiritual as opposed to something material. Everything about a word is material: it begins as a puff of air, is put in motion by the contraction of our lungs, is pushed up the tunnel of the esophagus through the constrictions of larynx and pharynx, and is then worked on by that excellent trio, tongue, teeth, and lips, to make a word. That is not the end of the physicalness, the materiality, of word. Air composed of a combination of named gases, mixed with a variety of pollutants in the air we breathe, transmits the word to our ears along paths, these incredible miniature ear miracles of engineering, paths that are just as physical as any concrete bridge or asphalt roadway. The word bangs against a membrane and activates tiny acoustical gears that drive the sound into the synapses of the brain, at

which point we repent of our sins or believe in Jesus or love our enemy or visit the sick, any one of which actions is physical: word into flesh. Meister Eckhart (d. 1327), the Dominican preacher in Germany, famously put contemplation in this earthy context in a sermon: “if a man were in rapture like Saint Paul, and knew a sick man who needed some soup from him, I should think it far better if you abandoned rapture for love.”²⁴

“Word into flesh” doesn’t mean the spiritual into the physical. The word is already physical; it means into *Jesus’* flesh. Particular, local, named flesh. And when we pray, “Let it be done to me according to thy word,” we mean for it to take place in our flesh; a miraculous conception in the womb of our lives, “Christ in me,” the word as materially present as the paths that we walk, the word both as obvious and as mysterious as the light that shines from the lamps we hold.

Denis Donoghue, one of our best literary critics, once commented that when William Carlos Williams, one of our very best poets, “saw a footprint he had no interest in the meaning of the experience as knowledge, perception, vision, or even truth: he just wanted to find the foot.”²⁵ This is what contemplatives do, look around and within for the foot that fits the (Scripture) footprint.

Contemplatio, unlike its three companions, is not something we self-consciously do; it happens, it is

a gift, it is something to which we are receptive and obedient. In the language of our tradition, it is “infused.” Contemplation “is not something we can produce or practice.... We can be ready for it, we can prepare for it, we cannot, however, elicit it....”²⁶ We do not become contemplative before Scripture by turning toward it as object, by an active intellect at work on the object, organizing and analyzing. It can only be “the knowledge of love, of desire and delight, the will consenting to the drawing of the divine beauty.”²⁷ Contemplation is not another thing added on to our reading and meditating and praying but the coming together of God’s revelation and our response, an unself-conscious following of Jesus, a Jesus-coherent life. It is not thinking about God, not asking continuously “what would Jesus do?” but jumping into the river; not strategizing the success of my life but just being myself, my Christ-in-me-life; not calculating effects but accepting and submitting to on-earth-as-it-is-in-heaven conditions.

And that means that most contemplation is unnoticed, unremarked, unself-conscious. So much of the word of God is revealed in silence, hiddenness, and mystery²⁸ that chances are, even if we have been rubbing shoulders with a contemplative all our life, we wouldn’t know it. It is even more unlikely that we will ever recognize a contemplative in a mirror.

The impossibility of evaluation, at least self-evaluation, releases us into a great freedom as we read these Holy Scriptures and struggle and enjoy and receive

them. We will not try too hard. We will not set ourselves perfectionist goals. We won't take over. We won't insist on measured progress. We won't compete. Having read and meditated and prayed, and continuing to read and meditate and pray, we will step back and bless, love and obey, and breathe "let it be to me according to your word." Relax and receive.

Once more: *caveat lector*.

Lectio divina is not a methodical technique for reading the Bible. It is a cultivated, developed habit of *living* the text in Jesus' name. This is the way, the *only* way, that the Holy Scriptures become formative in the Christian church and become salt and leaven in the world. It is not through doctrinal disputes and formulations, not through strategies to subdue the barbarians, not through congregational programs to educate the laity in the "principles and truths" of the Scriptures — not in any of the ways in which the Bible is so commonly and vigorously promoted among us as an impersonal weapon or tool or program. It is astonishing how many ways we manage to devise for using the Bible to avoid a believing obedience, both personal and corporate, in receiving and following the Word made flesh.

Yes, by all means: *Beware*.

¹. This classic formulation of *lectio divina*, preceded by a thousand years of practices intended to shape reading into

living, was by a European monk, Guigo the Second in the twelfth century. Among his many elaborations of the exercise this one is characteristic: "Reading, as it were, puts the solid food into our mouths, meditation chews it and breaks it down, prayer obtains the flavour of it and contemplation is the very sweetness which makes us glad and refreshes us." Quoted and commented on by Simon Tugwell, O.P., *Ways of Imperfection* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1985), p. 94.

². T. S. Eliot, "The Dry Salvages," *The Complete Poems and Plays* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Co., 1985), p. 136.

³. Sandra M. Schneiders, *The Revelatory Text* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), p. 29.

⁴. Denise Levertov, *The Stream and the Sapphire* (New York: New Directions, 1997), p. 31.

⁵. Northrop Frye quotes and discusses Stevens in *The Educated Imagination* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), pp. 30-32.

⁶. Wendell Berry, *A Continuous Harmony* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972), p. 12.

⁷. Ivan Illich and Barry Sanders, *The Alphabetization of the Popular Mind* (New York: Vintage, 1988), p. 24.

⁸. "Phaedrus," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Random House, 1937, first published 1892), vol. 1, pp. 277-82.

⁹. Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and Literature* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), p. 22.

¹⁰. J. Knox, "Sibylline Oracles," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon, 1962), vol. 4, p. 343.

¹¹. Warren Wiersbe, *Leadership Journal* (spring 1983): 23.

¹². G. K. Chesterton, *The Father Brown Stories* (1929).

[13.](#) P. T. Forsyth, *The Soul of Prayer* (London: Independent Press, 1916), p. 46.

[14.](#) “The working out of the biblical model for the understanding of God was not an intellectual process so much as a personal conflict, in which men struggled with their God, and with each other about their God. It was, in Old Testament terms, a *ribh* or dispute, a controversy to which the public attention is drawn so that men can learn from it. If there are distortions in the biblical picture of God, they belong not only to inadequate vision but to human resistance against God’s truth and against insights seen by other men.” James Barr, *The Bible in the Modern World* (London: SCM, 1973), p. 119.

[15.](#) Quoted by Artur Weiser, *The Psalms* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), pp. 19-20.

[16.](#) “We often assume that the problem of interpreting words is a matter of knowing what they mean and linking meanings together in some reasonable order in our minds. But it’s not quite like that. The problem is to decide at any moment what our relation to the words should be, even when we know what they mean.” Denis Donoghue, *Ferocious Alphabets* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1976), p. 14.

[17.](#) Teresa of Ávila, *A Life of Prayer*, abridged and edited by James M. Houston (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1983), p. xxvii.

[18.](#) Julian Green, *Diaries* (New York: Macmillan, 1955), p. 101.

[19.](#) Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. A. V. Littledale (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1963), p. 111.

[20.](#) Kathleen Norris, *The Quotidian Mysteries* (New York: Paulist, 1998), pp. 1, 70.

[21.](#) Denise Levertov, *The Poet in the World* (New York: New Directions, 1973), p. 8, my emphasis.

[22.](#) I am not alone in this. There is a growing company of others who are likewise determined to make the word and all that it means available to every Christian, regardless of his or her place in the world. For me, the clearest and most comprehensive witness comes from Hans Urs von Balthasar in his *Prayer*.

[23.](#) Quoted by Saul Bellow in his 1976 Nobel Lecture in *It All Adds Up* (New York: Penguin, 1995), pp. 88-89.

[24.](#) Quoted by Rowan Williams, *Christian Spirituality* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1980), p. 134.

[25.](#) Denis Donoghue, *The Ordinary Universe* (New York: Macmillan, 1968), p. 182.

[26.](#) Andrew Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981), p. 14.

[27.](#) Rowan Williams discussing Augustine: *Christian Spirituality*, p. 74.

[28.](#) For an accurate, passionate exposition of this see Virginia Stem Owens, *The Total Image* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), especially pp. 39-61.