

Lectio divina

If you are in a group, you can also read each of these steps aloud as you enter into them so that everybody is engaged.

Step 1: Lectio

The first step involves reading the text aloud. Reading it through three times is often a good amount, leaving time for a few minutes of quiet between readings. The purpose of this step is to calm our minds and listen, paying attention to what words or phrases stand out. After the third reading, it is common practice to share aloud which word or phrase resonated.

Step 2: Meditatio

The second step, meditation, leads us to ask: ‘What is the text saying to us personally?’ The first two steps often blend together. As we read or listen to the Scriptures, it is good to repeat the word or phrase in our minds, letting it sink in and pondering why it resonates. To provide a more structured approach, the meditatio section of this resource also offers reflections on the Gospel reading to help unpack its core themes.

Step 3: Oratio

The third step is prayer, a time to enter conversation with the Lord, responding to what he has said. Those present might like to bring their questions, their desires, or their thanksgiving before God.

Step 4: Contemplatio

The fourth step is a time of resting in God’s presence, simply being with him, loving him. Pope Benedict XVI also said this step was about asking for the gift of seeing the world the way God sees it (VD §87), so that what we have glimpsed through the Scriptures can transform us.

Step 5: Actio

While this is not a traditional step in lectio divina, many spiritual traditions have now included it, recognising the importance of changed hearts overflowing into a life of charity and discipleship. With this step, participants can discuss or journal how they might live out what they have learned more practically, so that they can be a living witness of hope to others.

Those leading groups can also use this step to begin conversation, inviting everyone to share their experience and prayers, thoughts and questions about the subject for each week.

The First Sunday of Advent

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As it was in Noah’s day, so will be the coming of the Son of man. For in those days before the Flood people were eating, drinking, taking wives, taking husbands, until the day Noah went into the ark, and they suspected nothing until the Flood came and swept them all away. So will be the coming of the Son of man. Then of two men in the fields, one is taken, one left; of two women grinding at the mill, one is taken, one left. So stay awake, because you do not know the day when your master is coming. You may be sure of this, that if the householder had known at what time of the night the burglar would come, he would have stayed awake and would not have allowed anyone to break through the wall of the house. Therefore, you too must stand ready, because the Son of man is coming at an hour you do not expect.

(Matthew 24:37–44)

Lectio

Whether you are reading this passage of Scripture individually or as part of a group, before moving on to the following reflections, spend some time praying slowly with it according to the first step of lectio divina. Read the passage two or three times and see what sticks out. Feel free to journal your initial questions or thoughts.

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Meditatio

In the Catholic tradition, hope is a theological (or supernatural) ‘virtue’. What this means is that hope is ultimately a gift of grace. It grows in proportion to how much we ask for it. In the same way the apostles asked Jesus, ‘Increase our faith’ (Lk 17:5), so we should always ask: ‘Increase our hope.’

The Gospel reading today offers a confronting theme: God's judgement. For many people, the idea of looking forward to the Day of Judgement, to Christ's Second Coming, might be paradoxical. The history of artistic depictions of the Last Judgement have inspired awe and terror, but perhaps very little hope. In his encyclical *Spe salvi*, Pope Benedict XVI sought to refresh our understanding of this mystery by saying: 'The image of the Last Judgement is not primarily an image of terror, but an image of hope ... God is justice and creates justice. This is our consolation and our hope. And in his justice there is also grace' (§44).

In this excerpt from Pope Francis' Jubilee Bull, *Spes non confundit*, the late pontiff explores this idea further, helping us to contemplate the mystery of God's judgement as a mystery of hope.

'What, then, will become of us after death? With Jesus, beyond this threshold we will find eternal life, consisting in full communion with God ... What will characterize this fullness of communion? Being happy. Happiness is our human vocation, a goal to which all aspire.

But what is happiness? What is the happiness that we await and desire? Not some fleeting pleasure, a momentary satisfaction that, once experienced, keeps us longing for more, in a desperate quest that leaves our hearts unsated and increasingly empty. We aspire to a happiness that is definitively found in the one thing that can bring us fulfilment, which is love. Thus, we will be able to say even now: I am loved, therefore I exist; and I will live forever in the love that does not disappoint, the love from which nothing can ever separate me ...

Another reality having to do with eternal life is God's judgement, both at the end of our individual lives and at the end of history. Artists have often attempted to portray it – here we can think of Michelangelo's magnum opus in the Sistine Chapel – in accordance with the theological vision of their times and with the aim of inspiring a sense of awe in the viewer. We should indeed prepare ourselves consciously and soberly for the moment when our lives will be judged, but we must always do this from the standpoint of hope, the theological virtue that sustains our lives and shields them from groundless fear. The judgement of God, who is love (cf. 1 Jn 4:8.16), will surely be based on love, and in particular on all that we have done or failed to do with regard to those in need, in whose midst Christ, the Judge himself, is present (cf. Mt 25:31-46). Clearly, then, we are speaking of a judgement unlike any handed down by human, earthly tribunals; it should be understood as a rapport of truth with the God who is love and with oneself, within the unfathomable mystery of divine

mercy ... Judgement, then, concerns the salvation in which we hope and which Jesus has won for us by his death and resurrection. It is meant to bring us to a definitive encounter with the Lord. The evil we have done cannot remain hidden; it needs to be purified in order to enable this definitive encounter with God's love.'

Spes non confundit §21 - 22

Oratio

Spend some time now in conversation with the Lord.
Respond to his Word.

Where has your prayer and meditation led you? What questions or desires do you want to bring before God? Bring them now. Feel free to use the journaling space on the first page to help you pray

Contemplatio

Pope Benedict XVI said that this step of contemplation (contemplatio) is the time of taking up ‘as a gift from God, his own way of seeing and judging reality ... forming within us “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16)’ (Verbum domini §87). Spend some time resting quietly in God’s presence, asking for the gift of his heart and mind.

Actio

If you are in a group setting, discuss your thoughts and meditations from your time in prayer. Towards the end of your time together, focus especially on how your prayer might lead to action, to greater witness. If this is an individual exercise, journal your thoughts and resolutions here.

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