

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 Third Sunday of Advent

Revised New Jerusalem Bible © 2019 by Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd

Now John had heard in prison what the Messiah was doing and he sent his disciples to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect someone else?” Jesus answered, “Go back and tell John what you hear and see; the blind see again, and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the dead hear, the dead are raised to life and the good news is proclaimed to the poor; and blessed is anyone who does not find me a cause of stumbling.” As the men were leaving, Jesus began to talk to the people about John. “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swaying in the breeze? Then what did you go out to see? Someone wearing fine clothes? Look, those who wear fine clothes are to be found in royal palaces. Then what did you go out for? To see a prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one of whom it is written: Look, I am going to send my messenger ahead of you to prepare the way before you. Amen I say to you, of the children born to women, none has been raised up greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of Heaven is greater than he.”

Matthew 11:2-11

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.

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

Meditatio

When things go bad, it is easy to look only at the reasons for despair. With this Gospel passage today, we have a fascinating glimpse into what was, for John the Baptist, a moment of challenge and suffering. Imprisoned, his life on the line, he sends his disciples to ask whether Jesus truly is the Messiah. This was John, remember: the man who baptised Jesus and publicly identified him as the Lamb of God. Things must have been looking bleak from inside the jail cell if he was contemplating the horrifying possibility that he had got it all wrong.

However, Jesus' response is equally fascinating. He points John to all the miracles, the healings, the teaching; he points towards them as signs of hope, confirming that, yes, he is the Messiah. There is profound spiritual wisdom in this because when life becomes challenging, we often forget the grace, the signs of hope, and elevate the darkness instead. But hope is nourished, and grows, by remembering and contemplating goodness and grace.

In his Jubilee Bull *Spes non confundit*, Pope Francis highlighted the connection between the virtue of patience and hope. We tend to think of patience as only a negative virtue, the ability to endure suffering. But the pope reminded us of how relevant it is for us today, beset by constant distraction and activity. Patience not only allows us to endure suffering but to contemplate the goodness of creation, to simply be in the presence of God and in the presence of others. If we can re-learn the virtue of patience, our hope will blossom.

'Saint Paul is a realist. He knows that life has its joys and sorrows, that love is tested amid trials, and that hope can falter in the face of suffering. Even so, he can write: "We boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope" (Rom 5:3-4). For the Apostle, trials and tribulations mark the lives of those who preach the Gospel amid incomprehension and persecution (cf. 2 Cor 6:3-10). Yet in those very contexts, beyond the darkness we glimpse a light: we come to realize that evangelization is sustained by the power flowing from Christ's cross and resurrection. In this way, we learn to practise a virtue closely linked to hope, namely patience. In our fast-paced world, we are used to wanting everything now. We no longer have time simply to be with others; even families find it hard to get together and enjoy one another's company. Patience has been put to flight by frenetic haste, and this has proved detrimental, since it leads to impatience, anxiety and even gratuitous violence, resulting in more unhappiness and self-centredness.

Nor is there much place for patience in this age of the Internet, as space and time yield to an ever-present “now”. Were we still able to contemplate creation with a sense of awe, we might better understand the importance of patience. We could appreciate the changes of the seasons and their harvests, observe the life of animals and their cycles of growth, and enjoy the clarity of vision of Saint Francis. In his *Canticle of the Creatures*, written exactly eight hundred years ago, Francis saw all creation as a great family and could call the sun his “brother” and the moon his “sister”. A

renewed appreciation of the value of patience could only prove beneficial for ourselves and for others. Saint Paul often speaks of patience in the context of our need for perseverance and confident trust in God's promises. Yet, before all else, he testifies to God's own patience, as "the God of all patience and encouragement" (Rom 15:5). Patience, one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit, sustains our hope and strengthens it as a virtue and a way of life. May we learn to pray frequently for the grace of patience, which is both the daughter of hope and at the same time its firm foundation.'

Spes non confundit §4

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.