

Luther's Reform of the Lectio Divina:

ORATIO, MEDITATIO, TENTATIO

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Just as he did with the Ten Commandments, Luther took the Medieval monastic practice of spiritual reading, and radicalized it, putting his peculiarly worldly, cruciform stamp on it. The three part practice continued to be used by the Pietists for centuries, and has begun to experience something of a renaissance in our own day. It is a way of concentrating the mind on a particular expression or experience of God's Word, and linking the fruits of that concentration with daily life. If you have read any of Luther's lectures on Biblical texts, you've seen some of the by-products of this sort of lectio divina.

Luther outlined the practice best in the preface to his Psalm's commentary:

Prayer/ Meditation/Testing

ORATIO, MEDITATIO, TENTATIO

A Right Way to Study Theology

I will show you a right way to study theology, which I myself have practiced, and, if you adhere to it, you too shall be so learned that, if need should arise, you will be able to write books that are as good as those of the fathers and councils, just as I may make bold to boast in God, without pride or deceit, that I would not acknowledge that some of the fathers had much on me when it comes to writing books, though I am far from being able to boast the same of my life. It is the way that King David teaches in Psalm 119 and which was without a doubt adhered to by all the patriarchs and prophets. There you will find three rules which are abundantly set forth in the whole psalm: oratio, meditatio, tentatio.

First, you must know that the Holy Scriptures is a book that makes foolishness of the wisdom of all other books, because none of them teaches eternal life, only this one alone. Therefore you must straightway despair of your own mind and reason, for you will not attain it by these. On the contrary, with such presumption you will cast yourself, and others with you, from heaven into the abyss of hell, as did Lucifer. Rather kneel down in your closet and pray to God in true humility and earnestness that through his dear Son he may grant you his Holy Spirit to enlighten, guide and give you understanding. You see how David in the above-mentioned psalm prays again and again: Teach me! O Lord, instruct me! Show me! and many other expressions like them. Even though he knew well the text of Moses and other books and heard and read them daily, he still desires the real Master of the Scriptures himself in order that he may not tackle them with his reason and make himself the master. For this produces those

sectarians who allow themselves to think that the Scriptures are subject to them and easily mastered with their own reason, as if they were the fables of Markolf or Aesop, which require neither the Holy Spirit nor prayer.

Second, you should meditate, not only in your heart but also outwardly, repeating and comparing the actual, literal words in the book, reading and rereading them with careful attention and thought as to what the Holy Spirit means by them. And guard against being satiated or thinking that when you have read, heard, or said it once or twice you understand it fully; for this will never make an excellent theologian; it will be like immature fruit that falls before it is half ripe.

This is why in the psalm you see David constantly exulting that he would do nothing else, day and night and always, but speak, write, utter, sing, hear, and read God's Word and commandments. For God will not give you his Spirit apart from the external word. Be guided accordingly, for it was not for nothing that he commanded that his Word should be outwardly written, preached, read, sung, and spoken.

Thirdly, there is trial (*tentatio*). This is the touchstone that teaches you not only to know and understand but also to experience how right, how true, how sweet, how lovely, how mighty, how comforting is God's Word, wisdom above all wisdom.

So you see why it is that David so often in this psalm laments concerning all the enemies, the wicked princes and tyrants, the lying and godless spirits, which he must suffer by reason of the very fact that he meditates, that he applies himself to God's Word, as we have said. For as soon as God's Word goes forth through you the devil will afflict you and make you a real doctor [of theology] and teach you by his temptations to seek and to love God's Word. For I myself . . . must be very thankful to my papists for pummeling, pressing, and terrifying me; that is, for making me a fairly good theologian, for otherwise I would not have become one . . .

So there you have David's rule. If you study well according to this example, you will also sing and praise with him in the words of the same psalm: "The law of thy mouth is better to me than thousands of gold and silver pieces." "Thy commandment makes me wiser than my enemies, for it is ever with me. I have more understanding than all my teachers, for thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged, for I keep thy precepts." And you will find how flat and moldy the books of the fathers will taste to you; you will not only despise the enemy's books but the longer you go on the less will you be pleased with your own writing and teaching. When you have come to this point then you may confidently trust that you have begun to become a real theologian, who is able to teach not only young and imperfect Christians but also the advanced and mature; for Christ's church has in it all kinds of Christians, young, old, weak, sick, sound, strong, fresh, lazy, simple, wise, etc.

Martin Luther, quoted in Minister's Prayer Book, ed., by John W. Doberstein (pp. 287ff.)

How can we use Luther's pattern of scriptural devotion today?

First of all, figure out what the text or other focus will be for your meditation. Luther's explanation uses the psalms, which are a dandy place to start. You might also want to try any of the lessons for an upcoming Sunday, or a snippet from Paul's letters, John, Jeremiah, or Isaiah. Once you've got the hang of it, the sky is the limit for foci. Anything which could have a defensible claim at being the Word of God will work – preaching or devotional writing, music (Bach's Mass in B Minor most especially), icons – any of these can reward the kind of concentrated attention the practice demands.

Second, find a place where you will be uninterrupted, and a posture in which you are able comfortably to stay for a good long time. Seated rather straight with your palms open upward on your knees or thighs is a classic posture, but any one which doesn't call for your attention is good.

Now you're ready for the practice itself. The first step is **ORATIO** – Prayer. This prayer is neither long nor intercessory. It is prayer in preparation for the practice of meditation. Pray (out loud preferably) for the promised gifts of the Holy Spirit, of insight, discernment and protection. Ask that all competing voices (internal and external) be silenced, so that you can hear the Word God has for you in this reading.

A good preparation for this prayer, although Luther himself doesn't make reference to it, is the sort of "centering prayer" which has become popular recently. This is simply a time of quietness aimed at focusing the mind on the task at hand. The "Jesus prayer" is a fine vehicle for this – saying "Jesus, Son of God" as you inhale and "have mercy on me" as you exhale.

When you are ready, move on to the second step, **MEDITATIO** – Meditation. This step requires a slow, conscious attention to the text, and anything which can slow you down in your normal rapid, critical reading would be helpful. Here's one way – read the passage aloud first, then go back and re-read the first phrase. Then savor that phrase for its meanings and connections. Listen to it. Feed on it. Digest it. Suck its marrow. When it feels like you're done, go on to the next phrase.

If you'd like an example of what this might result in, take a look at the first two lines of Psalm 46: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." "A Mighty Fortress" is a meditation on these lines, rather than a paraphrase of the whole psalm. Luther begins by repeating the lines fairly closely. Then he works on the image of the trouble we face – the assaults of the devil. Then his mind makes the connection between our situation facing a deadly foe mightier than ourselves and David's position before Goliath – apparently untenable,

and yet totally secure. Then in stanza three (with some help from 1 Peter) he continues the image of our troublous times, with not a single foe but enough to fill the land – for him, as usual, these are the Pope and all other enemies of the Word. But even in this situation, God is a refuge. But God is not simply a hiding place, but (stanza 4) also fighter on our behalf.

Now, suppose you were to meditate on that same sentence. You might begin by repeating “God is our refuge and strength.” Depending on what jumps out at you, you might ask:

- What is a refuge?
- Why do I need one?
- How is God protecting me, or how do I hope God will protect me?
- How am I attacked – from outside and by my own patterns and besetting sins?

Or you might take a different tack. You might ask

- Who is the “our” in “God is our refuge?”
- Who is God throwing me together with for our own protection?
- How am I being guarded by other people?
- How am I protecting others?

Two bits of advice about this step. First, if your mind starts to wander back (inappropriately) to matters outside the passage, catch yourself, apologize and re-focus. If it continues to wander, move on to the next phrase. If it still wanders, it may be time to close the exercise and address the matter which is clamoring for attention. How do you know if this wandering is inappropriate? If it springs from the text (“I’m not protecting Chris, I’m afflicting her.”) chances are it’s appropriate. If it doesn’t (“How long has it been since I cleaned the coils behind the refrigerator?”), chances are it’s not.

Second, don’t argue with or analyze the text – listen to it. Take it on its own terms. The intention of this exercise is not exegesis or investigation or sermon preparation. The object is to be addressed by the Word that God has for you right now in this text. With some texts, this is simply impossible, and you’ll need to find different texts. It might be better, for instance, not to focus on the texts for next Sunday, so that you won’t constantly be asking, “What am I going to say Sunday from the pulpit?” rather than “What’s God saying to me now?” That’s one reason why the psalm is such a fine subject for this kind of meditation.

Over the course of this savoring, much will occur to you. You may start, for instance, with an imprecatory psalm, where the writer is asking God to destroy his enemies. You might then be led to consider who your enemies are – not the alligators in the congregation, the candidacy committee, or your siblings, but the facets of your own personality which are trying to woo you away from God – your pride or procrastination, your judgmentalism or self-abnegation. On the

other hand, you might be led to concern for a particular person – meditating on the story of Zacchaeus, for instance, might open your eyes to the needs of a person who keeps setting herself outside of the community. Keep those insights in mind – they’re the beginning of the third stage.

In the meantime, at some point you must end the second stage. Either you have come to the end of your appointed time, or to the end of your attention span, and it’s time to close. A prayer of thanks for the insights given and the time together would not be inappropriate!

But now begins the third step, which was Luther’s real addition to medieval practice. The third step is **TENTATIO** – Trial. And it’s trial in two different ways, both of them beginning with the end of meditation and lasting not for minutes, but for the rest of the day. Keep the insights you’ve gained from meditatio in front of you throughout the day, and watch for the chance to act on them. If you’ve been led to pray for someone or some cause in particular, watch for an opportunity to put that prayer into action. If you’ve discovered a besetting sin which is trying to separate you from God, watch for an opportunity to resist it. In general, try out the insights you’ve been given. And because active prayer and constant conversion are neither easy nor comfortable things, such trying out will entail suffering – the third step is a trial in that sense, too.

Now this trying out can be helped by sharing the insights. We’re more likely to remember things if we speak them out loud or write them down. If you’re able to enter into this discipline with another person, reserve some time at the end of each session for reporting to each other what’s occurred to you while you’ve been listening. Again, only analyze or judge in the most unusual of circumstances – this is a time for listening with respect to the different Words God may speak through the same words. If you must meditate alone, keep a journal, jotting down some of the insights you’ve received.

And above everything else, don’t worry – you can’t do this wrong. It’s not a complicated, arcane discipline, but a way to help create the space for God to speak among and amid the noises of life. If you miss a phrase, God will find another way to give it to you. If you mistake your own desire for God’s will, the community will be there to re-direct you – that’s why this is not a replacement for corporate worship, but a complement to it. Even if nothing else happens, you’ll become intimately acquainted with Scripture, not just as an object of study, but as a living carrier of God’s voice.

