

# DIALOGUE *with* GOD

READING & PRAYING  
WITH SACRED SCRIPTURE

*how to incorporate lectio divina  
into your Catholic Bible study*



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# *lectio divina*

## a dialogue between God and man

In the book of *Genesis* 1:1–3, when God creates the heavens and the earth, he does so by speaking. God speaks the world into being, and accordingly, all Creation is God’s message to us. What’s lacking from the beginning, however, is our ability to adequately reply to such a statement. How can we as creatures respond to our Creator? What can we say to equal the majesty of Creation?

The *Gospel According to John* 1:1 opens: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” We believe that Jesus is the perfect summary and expression of his Father. What God began speaking with Creation, he finished with his Son. What’s more, Jesus Christ also is humanity’s perfect response to God. By becoming man, Jesus is able to answer for all of us. In Christ, dialogue between God and his Creation becomes possible.

This dialogue between creature and Creator takes many forms in the Church today, culminating in the source and summit of Christian life, the Holy Eucharist, in which we recall, restate, and participate in Christ’s response on our behalf. The *Gospel According to Luke* 24:13–31 records the story of the two disciples leaving Jerusalem after Jesus’ Crucifixion. They’re despondent and confused when a stranger begins to accompany them on their way. To explain to them what’s happened, he uses the writings of what is now our Old Testament, going through story after story to demonstrate how these writings predict and describe what’s just taken place in Jerusalem. Finally, after a long journey, the disciples impose on the stranger to join them for a meal. At last, in the breaking of the bread, they recognize that stranger as Jesus Christ.

*Lectio divina* is designed to generate dialogue between the Divine Author of Scripture and the reader. Its four distinct parts work together to lead the reader into conversation with God. This model of *lectio divina* serves as the inspiration and the foundation for Turning to God’s Word Bible studies. ►

The Eucharist makes Christ present to us, but the words of Scripture allow us to come to know who he is and what he wants of us. By walking and talking with Jesus through Sacred Scripture, we can understand what Jesus did for us, and what he’s asking of each of us. The name the Church has given this journey is *lectio divina*, a Latin term that means “divine reading.”

**lectio** In carefully reading the Scriptures we directly encounter God's Word. *Lectio* means "reading," and the aim of *lectio* is to pluck out those portions of the text in which God is speaking to us at a given time in order to more deeply reflect on them. *Lectio divina* isn't a scholarly reading aimed at understanding every nuance of the biblical text. Instead, it's a spiritual reading, an opening of oneself to the living Word of God.

The way we approach communicating with God frames the type of conversations we're likely to have with God as a result. Though the Bible is a book, it's important to the process of *lectio divina* that we not read Sacred Scripture the same way in which we would read a novel. Rather, the Bible should be read as a sacred letter from our beloved in which he is attempting to reveal to us the deepest workings of his heart. As we learn to approach God's Word in this way, our hearts and minds will open to the deeper mysteries it contains, and intimate conversation with our Creator can begin.

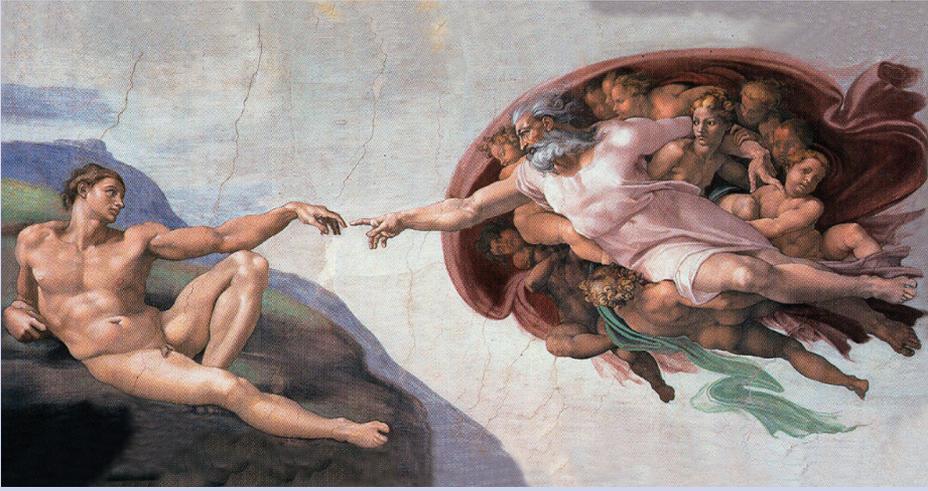
Though most people in our society know how to read, the reason so many of us suffer scriptural illiteracy is that we don't know how to read God's Word in a way that makes it come alive for us. Through *lectio divina*, we can learn to understand God's Word as God meant it to be understood. When this happens, our Catholic faith is opened to new and beautiful encounters with God.

One time-honored method of approaching *lectio divina* is to read the biblical text aloud. This helps

to slow our pace so that we can focus our attention on the meaning of the words. The effect can seem as though God is speaking to us through our own voice. Whether we read aloud or silently, it's necessary to read slowly and carefully. This allows each word to resonate and to convey its full force and meaning. We want to let God speak to us as we open our hearts to listen.

**meditatio** The second element of *lectio divina* is *meditatio*, meaning a "chewing over" or "dwelling upon." The purpose of *meditatio* is to reflect upon a portion of the text that stands out to us. It's during *meditatio* that we begin to engage God in his Word in a way that allows him to speak to us directly. We encounter God's Word, and we let it encounter and interact with us.

*Meditatio* involves asking why some elements of the text attract our attention. What is it that resonates with us in the biblical text, and what is that text saying to us? Reflection at this stage should create a connection between the reader and the text, allowing the text to become a part of the reader. It's in this way that God's Word comes alive in each of us.



Rather than reading an entire passage at once and then pondering its meaning, it's helpful to practice *lectio* until some particular word, phrase, or concept stands out. At that point, to preserve the moment of inspiration, we stop reading and ask ourselves what it was that stood out, and why. This approach creates a rhythm of reading a bit, then thinking, then reading a bit more, followed by more reflection. It's especially conducive to dialogue, since we're engaging God at every opportunity rather than having two separate but related monologues. *Meditatio* forms the heart of Bible study.

***oratio*** *Oratio* is named for the Latin word meaning “asking” or “prayer.” In *oratio* we respond to what God has spoken to us through our reading and reflection upon his Word.

These prayers can fall into a broad range of categories from giving thanks, to asking for further insight into a particular point, to asking God for a particular gift or grace depending on what in the biblical text moved us and how. The important thing to keep in mind is that these prayers should be expressions of our response to God based on what we've read.

It's crucial that all of our prayers be deeply rooted in Jesus Christ. We're trying to speak to God, and since Jesus is the only adequate response to God's Word, we must endeavor to unite ourselves with him in thought, word, and deed as we respond to God's Word. In this way, our dialogue with God becomes a sharing in the mystery of the Blessed Trinity—and, as such, a participation in the living God. ►

## *contemplatio*

The fourth element of *lectio divina* is the highest and ultimate goal of our dialogue with God. The word *contemplatio* comes from a Latin word meaning “to look at hard” or “to gaze at deeply.” In *contemplatio*, we’re caught up in a communion with the divine. Dialogue has run its course, and we find ourselves in the presence of God.

*Contemplatio* can happen at any time while we’re engaged in *lectio divina*. This is the goal of our study of Scripture—a closer relationship with

God. When our study leads us to this basking in the divine presence, it no longer is necessary at that time to continue reading and studying. Rather, we should in those moments surrender ourselves to God and gaze fondly at our Creator. As reading a love letter no longer is timely when we’re caught up in our lover’s embrace, so continuing with the other stages of *lectio divina* when we encounter *contemplatio* is missing the point.

These four elements of *lectio divina* provide the framework for developing dialogue with God in the reading of the Sacred Scriptures. The first two elements, *lectio* and *meditatio*, outline a traditional Catholic method of opening ourselves to hear

what God is saying to us in his Word. In this way, God is able to speak to us clearly and profoundly in the context of our own lives. These two elements combined form one direction of our dialogue with God. *Oratio* forms our response to God’s Word. It’s in *oratio*, through Jesus Christ, that we can speak back to God. Finally, *contemplatio* is a drawing closer in union with God to whom we’ve been speaking. Through the rhythm and interchanges of these four elements, intimate relationship with God becomes a reality.

*Lectio divina* isn’t as simple as following steps one, two, three, and four, and no specific study materials can promise that participants will experience *contemplatio* at any set time. God alone determines how and when to enter into more intimate relationship with individual men and women. Nevertheless, regular and careful reading, thinking, and praying about God’s Word is a traditional Catholic approach to Scripture study that for centuries has served as a reliable gateway to *lectio divina*, pointing thousands of Christians toward richer and more satisfying relationships with God. ✕

While *contemplatio* is a real element of personal Bible study, it seldom enters into group study. It’s a gift from God that no amount of method or guidance can guarantee. Although *contemplatio* is available to all who prayerfully read and study Scripture, it’s not within the purview of group study. *Contemplatio* isn’t something that can be brought about through human orchestration, but it should be recognized as the ultimate aim of all Scripture study.

# how the Church makes sense of the Bible



What should we look for when we're reading the Bible? How should we interpret what we read? The tradition of the Catholic Church as compiled by St. Thomas Aquinas recognizes two senses of Scripture—the literal and the spiritual. The spiritual sense is further subdivided into the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical (paragraphs 115–117 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*). What do these senses mean, and how can we use them in Bible study?

## *the literal sense*

This sense of Scripture refers to what the biblical text says, to the historical context in which it was written, and to questions of authorship and structure of the text. Coming to understand the literal sense of Scripture uses the same process that we'd use to study and understand any other text, and it's an important process for providing a point of reference for interpretation of the spiritual sense of a biblical passage.

“Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask and I will not put the LORD to the test.” And he said, “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary men, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” —*Book of Isaiah 7:11–14*

In the passage above, we see part of a conversation between the prophet Isaiah and Ahaz, king of Judah. Historical context tells us that King Ahaz is about to make a disastrous military alliance with Egypt in an effort to fight the Assyrian power. The religion of the people of Judah prohibits ►

such an alliance, and the prophet is attempting to dissuade the king from his intended action. The text clearly demonstrates that Ahaz's false piety is not pleasing to Isaiah, who in return offers God's rebuke in the form of a prophecy: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel."

In the literal sense of the *Book of Isaiah*, this prophecy is referring to the birth of king Ahaz's successor, Hezekiah, who's remembered as one of the great kings of Judah because he banned idolatry. In rejecting the prophet's words, Ahaz is rejecting God. This foretelling shows that God also is rejecting Ahaz as king of Judah and is appointing a successor who will listen.

Understanding this sense has an impact on translation. The Hebrew word *almah*, which here is translated as "virgin," also can be translated as "young woman." In the literal sense of this passage, properly speaking, *almah* cannot mean "virgin" as Hezekiah is born in the usual fashion.

Understanding the literal sense of the passage gives us a good idea of what's going on at this time with God's people, and it also shows how God is at work through the kingship of Judah at a time when the kings are obeying God as well as at a time when they aren't. This understanding anchors the way that we look at the spiritual sense of Scripture.

*the allegorical sense* The allegorical sense of Scripture explains how the particular passage points to Jesus Christ. In the case of the above passage from the *Book of Isaiah*, the Evangelist Matthew gives us some help with this interpretation.

But as he considered this, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit; she will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfil what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Emmanuel" (which means, God with us).

—*Gospel According to Matthew 1:20–23*

Here the text that foretold the birth of Hezekiah also is being used to describe the virgin birth of Jesus, showing that one prophecy can have multiple fulfillments and that one text can be interpreted in multiple senses. What King Hezekiah could only partially accomplish, Jesus can fulfill. The prophecy made in the *Book of Isaiah* is being reframed to fit a different circumstance. In the *Gospel According to Matthew*, the prophecy that the Evangelist quotes from the *Book of Isaiah* changes in meaning because in this New Testament context, something more is intended than was meant in the Old Testament.

*the moral sense* The moral sense refers to the take-away lesson that can be found for us in the Scripture passage we're reading. In the example from the *Book of Isaiah* 7:11–14, Ahaz rejects the sign God offers him as proof of divine assistance. The lesson for contemporary Christians is to watch for the opportunities that God is giving us for faith, and to accept them when they are presented.

*the anagogical sense* Finally, the anagogical sense describes to how a passage of Scripture refers to heaven or to the end of time. In the case of our passage from the *Book of Isaiah*, we can see its anagogical fulfillment in the final book of the New Testament.

And a great sign appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child and she cried out in her pangs of birth, in anguish for delivery.  
—book of *Revelation* 12:1–2

The above passage from the book of *Revelation* shows us that all of heaven can be described in terms of the anticipation and the birth of this child that is foretold in the *Book of Isaiah* 7:11–14. In the anagogical sense, we're all still waiting for this birth and for its promise of God to be with us. The end of all time and the final consummation of God's union with humanity will bring the prediction in the *Book of Isaiah* to its ultimate fulfillment.



Not all senses of Scripture will be found in every biblical text we study. Every passage of Scripture will contain a literal and a spiritual interpretation, though not every passage will contain every aspect of the spiritual interpretation that we saw in our example.

“The sacramentality of the word can thus be understood by analogy with the real presence of Christ under the appearances of the consecrated bread and wine. By approaching the altar and partaking in the Eucharistic banquet we truly share in the body and blood of Christ. The proclamation of God's word at the celebration entails an acknowledgment that Christ himself is present, that he speaks to us, and that he wishes to be heard.”  
—*Verbum Domini* (The Word of the Lord)

# a comparison of different

To view how different Bible translations of the same text can differ, you can compare translations in the following example. Scholars date the original Greek text of the *Gospel According to John* to around 90 A.D. Following that text are nine translations of the *Gospel According to John* 3:7, beginning with the Latin Vulgate Bible, which was used by the Catholic Church for many centuries. The remaining eight examples are English translations and include the Catholic Douay-Rheims and the Protestant King James Version, as well as six contemporary translations.

μη θαυμάσης ὅτι εἶπόν σοι, δεῖ ὑμᾶς γεννηθῆναι ἄνωθεν.

**Greek New Testament** 90 A.D.

*“Non mireris quia dixi tibi: oportet vos nasci denuo.”*

**Latin Vulgate** 384

*“Wonder not, that I said to thee, you must be born again.”*

**Douay-Rheims** 1582

*“Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again.”*

**King James Version** 1611

*“Do not marvel that I said to you, ‘You must be born anew.’”*

**Revised Standard Version** 1946

*“Do not be surprised when I say: You must be born from above.”*

**Jerusalem Bible** 1955

*“Do not be amazed that I told you, ‘You must be born from above.’”*

**New American Bible** 1970

*“Do not be surprised when I say: You must be born from above.”*

**New Jerusalem Bible** 1985

*“Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’”*

**New Revised Standard Version** 1989

*“Do not be amazed that I told you, ‘You must be born from above.’”*

**New American Bible Revised Edition** 2011

# translations of the Bible

The preceding English translations differ in two key areas. First, the translation of the initial verb is rendered as “marvel,” “be amazed,” “be astonished,” etc. Second, the final adverb describing how one must be born is rendered differently as “again” or “anew,” and “from above.” Which of these is the best translation? One of these differences represents an error, while the other is a matter of the translator’s choice. Can you tell which one is the error?

Notice that the adverb at the end of the verse (“again,” “anew,” “from above”) changed at one point in time from “born again” or “born anew” to “born from above” and then remained “born from above.” For many centuries St. Jerome’s translation of the Latin Vulgate was the official Bible of the Church. When the Bible was translated into English, it was the Latin Vulgate that was translated. This left English speakers reading a translation of a translation, multiplying the possibility of an error being introduced into the biblical text. In the *Gospel According to John 3:7*, St. Jerome rendered the Greek word ἀνωθεν that literally means “from above,” as the Latin *denuo*, which means “anew” or “again.” Looking at the development of English translations, it’s easy to see that the earlier Bibles used only St. Jerome’s translation and so introduced an error in meaning, while the newer translations that rely on original sources agree as to the meaning of the original Greek word.

The second key area in which the translations of the *Gospel According to John 3:7* differ is between “wondering,” “marveling,” “being surprised,” “being amazed,” and “being astonished.” These translations show a range of slightly different words being used to describe what essentially is the same thing, and all are acceptable. Different modern translations will render passages such as these somewhat differently, and in many cases it’s entirely possible that all are correct.

When it comes to choosing your Bible, it’s important to use a modern Bible translation from the original languages in order to sidestep the issues that come into play when reading a translation of a translation. Among modern translations, one is not necessarily better than another. In the end, which translation you choose is of far less significance than that you actually read your Bible. ✨

Among modern translations of the Bible, one is not necessarily better than another. In the end, which translation you choose is of far less significance than that you actually read your Bible.



We've heard of one catechist who taught that the Blessed Virgin Mary died of a snakebite, based on the portrayal in popular religious art of the *protoevangelium* or "first Gospel" found in the book of *Genesis* 3:15. When knowledge of the Bible comes second- or third-hand, such misconceptions are inevitable.

## the problem?

What's behind the Turning to God's Word apostolate? It's no secret that biblical literacy is sorely lacking among lay Catholics. Very few of our Catholic brothers and sisters can quote chapter and verse for more than a small handful of Scripture passages. Of more concern, very few can summarize the history of our salvation, or relate the important roles that figures such as Abraham, Moses, Joshua, Ruth, or David played in that story.

With the loss of this context, the scriptural roots of the doctrines of our faith have become obscure. As an extreme example, we've heard of one catechist who taught that the Blessed Virgin Mary died of a snakebite, based on the portrayal in popular religious art of the *protoevangelium* or "first Gospel" found in the book of *Genesis* 3:15. When knowledge of the Bible comes second- or third-hand, such misconceptions are inevitable.

With the loss of the scriptural context of our faith, we lose touch with the reality that is Catholicism. The Catholic faith is and always has been deeply rooted in Scripture. Our doctrines, our Mass, our prayers, and our very way of life are steeped in the Sacred Scriptures. In a very real sense, the loss of scriptural competency among lay Catholics is the loss of our Catholic identity. If we do not know Scripture, how can we understand what we believe, what we practice, and what we pray?

Of more concern, however, is that when we lose the ability to engage the dynamic Word of God, we lose the ability to know and to relate to Jesus Christ.

# a loss of Catholic identity

St. Jerome famously wrote: “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ.” For contemporary Catholics, ignorance of Scripture poses an insurmountable obstacle to connecting with our faith and with our God. Jesus Christ speaks to us today in the living Word of God as clearly as he spoke two thousand years ago to his disciples. The question that lingers is: “Are we listening?”

Turning to God’s Word is an approach to Bible study refined over the course of many years. Our study materials help Catholics develop their understanding about how the Sacred Scriptures enlighten and shape the Catholic faith, but our Bible studies also are designed to help participants open a dialogue with the living Word of God. Our questions and commentary follow an approach that’s rooted in the centuries-old Catholic method of reading and studying the Bible known as *lectio divina*, which relies on the assumption that to truly engage with and understand the living Word of God, one must read and focus directly on the Bible rather than relying on intermediary explanations and commentaries. It’s our sincere hope that by providing an introduction to *lectio divina*, Turning to God’s Word will help Catholics to find a more engaging and dynamic approach to encountering Jesus Christ in the revealed Word of God. ✕

When we lose the ability to engage the dynamic Word of God, not only do we lose touch with the deep scriptural roots of the reality that is our Catholic faith, we lose the ability to know and to relate to Jesus Christ.

## Bible study: What’s in it for you?

Unless we as Catholics learn to pick up and to engage the Word of God directly, we never will be able to fully realize or share in the great gifts our holy Church provides in the Mass, prayers, and doctrine, because we will miss the most important element of Christian Bible study, the ability to enter into dialogue with the living Word of God. Through such dialogue, we learn not only to listen to what God is saying to us but also to offer a suitable response—and thereby to participate in the life-giving conversation that God desires to have with each of us through his most Sacred Word. ✕



The study of the Sacred Scriptures must be a door opened to every believer. It is essential that the revealed Word radically enrich our catechesis and all our efforts to pass on the faith. Evangelization demands familiarity with God's Word, which calls for dioceses, parishes, and Catholic associations to provide for a serious, ongoing study of the Bible, while encouraging its prayerful individual and communal reading. We do not blindly seek God, or wait for him to speak to us first, for God has already spoken, and there is nothing further that we need to know, which has not been revealed to us.

—Pope Francis

## *begin with prayer*

We especially like the following prayers.

**Lord Jesus:** You promised to send your Holy Spirit to teach us all things. As we read and study your Word today, allow it truly to touch our hearts and to change our lives. *Amen.*

**Heavenly Father:** Send forth your Spirit to enlighten our minds and dispose our hearts to accept your truth. Help us to listen to one another with openness and honesty, eager to learn from the talents and intuitions that you have given each of us. Never let differences of opinion diminish our mutual esteem and love. May we leave this meeting with more knowledge and love for you and your Son, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

## *end with prayer*

Here are four steps to composing a prayer that relates to specific Bible passages.

- 1** Address God by one of his many titles, preferably one that relates to the Scripture passage you've been studying.
- 2** Tell God something about himself that's related to the biblical text.
- 3** Present a personal petition related to your meditation.
- 4** Close your prayer through Jesus Christ, also mentioning the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. ✠