



## **Sacred reading recommended by Pope Benedict**

From the syndicated column “The Prayerful Heart”

By Julie McCarty

In an address given in the autumn of 2005, Pope Benedict spoke of Christ’s presence in the Word of God. “Christ lives in the Sacred Scriptures,” he reflected, pointing out that just as Catholics venerate the Body of the Lord, so too we venerate the Lord’s presence found in Holy Scripture. Quoting St. Jerome, he reminded us that “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ.” Being attentive to the God’s Word renews and rejuvenates the Church.

Pope Benedict also spoke highly of the ancient prayer form called “lectio divina” or “sacred reading” as a means to foster this renewal. Whereas bible studies help us understand Scripture basics, sacred reading is a Christian form of meditation that fosters an intimate dialogue between a person and God. Although understanding the text is important, “lectio divina” moves one into the realm of prayer and deepening one’s relationship with God. “If it is effectively promoted, this practice [sacred reading] will bring to the Church – I am convinced of it – a new spiritual springtime,” the pope proposed.

I can say from personal experience that the practice of sacred reading offers great benefits, both for the individual and the greater good of the community. Don’t let the idea of meditation or the Latin name scare you. If you can read, you can pray in this way. Sacred reading can be done in the morning before the kids are awake, at your desk during a coffee break, or on the subway commute. No need to lug around the entire bible (unless you want to)—I use one of the daily Mass readings found in a popular, pocket-sized monthly publication.

### **The How-To’s of Sacred Reading**

#### **Preparation**

Take a moment to calm yourself. Get ready to listen—really listen—to whatever God would like to tell you today. Ask the Holy Spirit to open your heart and guide your prayer time.

#### **Step #1 – Read (“Lectio”)**

Read a short passage of Scripture, slowly. *V e r y s l o w l y . . .* Treat it as a treasured letter from a dear friend, taking in every word.

#### **Step #2 – Meditate (“Meditatio”)**

Read the same passage again, thinking about how it strikes you. Chew on it, says one medieval writer. Pay attention to which word or phrase grabs you. What speaks to your heart? Is there an image that touches you (such as a fountain, bread, or a burning bush)? Why?

God may offer you insight, a word of comfort, or remind you of something you need to do. Watch for what pricks your emotions—this isn't just a head trip. (For example, I feel annoyed when Jesus reminds me to love my enemy—and that, I think, is precisely the point.)

### **Step #3 – Pray (“Oratio”)**

Respond to God in your own words. You might thank the Lord, ask forgiveness, or pray for deeper love for your enemy. Be personal, open, and honest. In other words, lay your cards on the table.

### **Step #4 – Enjoy God’s Presence in Silence (“Contemplatio”)**

Finally, just dwell quietly and lovingly in the presence of God, like a small child sitting contentedly in the loving arms of her parent. If you don't *feel* something special, that's OK. Just believe that God is right there with you, loving you immensely. Love God in return, in a silent embrace.

Praying this way, every day, or at least once a week, brings God's Word alive, providing food for our spiritual nourishment, a sort of spiritual Eucharist for the time in between Sundays. Scripture that is pondered carefully and responded to with love brings about the transformation of our lives, deepening our relationships not only with God, but with each other. Carrying Christ, the Living Word, in our hearts, we become more acutely aware of God's presence, often hidden and quiet, moving mysteriously in our midst. 