

# Lectio Divina

The Rev. Dr. Hans Boersma

## SESSION 1 LECTURE OUTLINE

### RESOURCES

- Ladder of Divine Ascent icon
- Lectio divina chart
- For further reading: *The Ladder of Monks and 12 Meditations, Guigo II* (Cistercian Studies Series)

### OVERCOMING SPIRITUAL ACROPHOBIA

- Physical acrophobia (the fear of heights) may be irritational; so too is spiritual acrophobia.
- Spiritual acrophobia and lectio divina don't go well together. You can't climb the "ladder of monks" and have spiritual acrophobia – or, at least, you must be willing to overcome your fear to engage lectio divina.

### GUIGO II ON ASCENDING THE LADDER

- Twelfth-century spiritual guide Guigo II ties together the themes of ascent on the ladder and the four rungs of lectio divina: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. These four rungs lead us to heaven, according to Guigo:

“One day when I was busy working with my hands I began to think about our spiritual work, and all at once four stages in spiritual exercise came into my mind: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation. These make a ladder for monks by which they are lifted up from earth to heaven. It has few rungs, yet its length is immense and wonderful, for its lower end rests upon the earth, but its top pierces the clouds and touches heavenly secrets.” (*The Ladder of Monks*)

- The theme of ladders and lectio divina is pervasive throughout the Christian tradition, including Origen, St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Benedict of Nursia's *Rule of Saint Benedict*, and Bernard of Clairvaux's *The Twelve Degrees of Humility and Pride*.
- Our culture is spiritually acrophobic. It is difficult for us to engage in divine reading. And when we “slack off” in our practices, including meditative reading, it becomes more difficult for us to reach our heavenly goal. It's time to dust off the ladder.

### RATIONALIZING OUR SPIRITUAL ACROPHOBIA

- There are two common scruples we use to rationalize our spiritual acrophobia: moralism and elitism.
- Examine “Ladder of Divine Ascent” (John Climacus, 12th c.)
  - Jesus Christ is at the top of the ladder, possibly offering the crown of victory to the monk at the top.
  - People are falling off the ladder; demons use various weaponry to pull them off (passions, tempting thoughts)
  - Monastic community is in the bottom right corner, encouraging and praying for those who are climbing the ladder.
  - Where do we see moralism?
    - Jesus Christ appears to be at the end waiting, leaving the impression that we have to “fight this out” ourselves. Union with Christ isn't the beginning point, but rather the end.
  - Where do we see elitism?
    - St. John of Climacus (the icon's writer) is the hero, reaching the reward at the end. He's followed by Archbishop Antonios.

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- However:
  - The emphasis on Jesus is evident. There are 30 rungs on the ladder, one for each year of Jesus' ministry on earth before he started his three-year journey to the cross.
  - Jesus' life provides the pattern for our own. Yes, Christ is there at the end of the ladder, where we'll be fully united with him in perfection. However, he is also the way and the truth that leads us to the end of the journey.
  - To John of Climacus, the ladder is not something we ascend as modern, autonomous individuals. We don't simply pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Rather, in a universe subject to spiritual forces, the prayers of the faithful have an actual impact on the climb that the rest of us are attempting to make.
  - Snobbery – or a looking down upon – is not implied here. Rather, the monks were keenly aware of the danger of spiritual pride. They recognized that any spiritual achievement might at the same time be occasion for the deadly vice of pride.
    - St. Benedict says you cannot ascend without humility because pride is the worst of vices. (Luke 14:11, Psalm 131)
    - "... we descend by exaltation and ascend by humility." (Rule of Benedict)

### AN INTRODUCTION TO THE RUNGS

- See lectio divina chart.
- **Lectio:**
  - It's a physical exercise; it should be read out loud.
  - You're just touching the surface. It's literal reading, historical analysis.
- **Meditatio:**
  - You're memorizing, making it part of your body as well as part of your mind.
  - This second step is associated with the second level of meaning in biblical interpretation: allegory. It's a rational search for hidden truth.
  - You're letting your mind roam free and pulling the connections you make into the meditation. The passage may remind you of other passages in scripture. You may map those things onto this passage.
- **Oratio:**
  - Devoted turning to God. This is when you experience compunction, recognize your shortcomings and weakness. This may prompt tears of grief in light of shortcomings.
- **Contemplatio:**
  - Experiencing something new. A switch from the natural to the supernatural. God's grace meets our desires for him.
  - "We can do nothing without Him; it is He who achieves our works in us, and yet not entirely without us." (The Ladder of Monks)
- These last two steps (*Oratio* and *Contemplatio*) require divine grace.