

Pastoral Letter for Lent 2011

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

A few months ago Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, published a document entitled “*Verbum Domini*” (“The Word of the Lord”). As the title suggests, it dealt with our reading of the Holy Scriptures.

In paragraph 87, the pope calls us to look at an ancient and wonderfully simple form of prayer that is as helpful to us now as it was in the lives of our ancestors. As we begin Lent, this form of prayer may be just the thing to help us renew and deepen our love of God.

This prayer is called “*lectio divina*” or “divine reading.” It consists of four steps, the first of which is simply *reading* a short passage of the Scriptures, paying close attention to its literal meaning.

You may find helpful at this stage a good Catholic study Bible with introductions to the books and some notes to explain passages that might not seem clear. Pope Benedict describes this as thinking about the question, “What does the Bible text say *in itself*?”

The second step is *meditation*. This means taking some time to think of what you have just read. Pope Benedict says that the question here is, “What does the Bible text say *to us*?”

It is here that we reflect on the fact that the Scriptures are not only books about the past, but are also books intended to teach us here and now how to open our minds and hearts to God. What does this text mean for me, once I take the time to think about it? How am I moved or challenged by what I have read?

The third step is *prayer*. The Scriptures have spoken to us. Now, the pope tells us, our next question should be, “What do we say to the Lord *in response to his word*?” This response may take various forms, which are usually one of these four: adoration, contrition, thanksgiving or supplication.

The passage may move us to adore the God who has given us his gifts. It may call us to a sense of our own repentance for the way in which we have received poorly or failed to receive those gifts.

It may touch our hearts with gratitude for all that God has done for us. It may move us to recognize even more clearly our own needs and to ask God for the help that we need every day.

It may be any combination of these. In any case, this is the stage at which we speak to God; when we allow ourselves time to reflect.

The fourth step is *contemplation*. Pope Benedict says that our question here is, “What *conversion* of mind, heart and life is the Lord asking of us?” At this stage, we simply hope to see things and judge reality through the eyes of God.

This is the most silent part of prayer, when we rest for a time in the presence of the Lord, and let him touch and teach us in whatever way he sees fit.

This is the stage at which we are doing what St. Paul tells us in his Epistle to the Romans when he says: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and

acceptable and perfect” (12:2).

This way of praying is delightfully simple and wonderfully effective. Try it during these weeks of Lent, and I think that you may find it a way of prayer that you will want to continue to use.

And, as Pope Benedict also says, you will find that praying in this way begins to move you toward a fifth step, a step that only begins in the prayer time and then expands to the rest of your life – the step of *action*, in which you begin to take all that prayer has taught you and start to make it into a new way of living: a way of love and peace and joy.

May the Lord bless you abundantly, and may this Lent be a time of grace and deep renewal.

Sincerely in Christ,

Bishop John Barres