

Leader Guide

A religious painting of a man, likely a saint, seated and reading a book. He is wearing a dark blue robe over a white tunic. He has a halo around his head and a star above it. His right hand is raised to his chin in a contemplative gesture. The background is a textured, light-colored wall.

**PRA Y WITH
S C R I P T U R E
M E E T G O D**

We speak to him when we pray; we listen to him when we read the divine oracles.

—St. Ambrose

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The quote on the front cover comes from St. Ambrose, **De officiis ministrorum** 1, 20,88: PL 16, 50. It can be found in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2653

A Guide for Leaders, Implementers and Small Group Facilitators for: Pray with Scripture, Meet God

Introduction

In a small office, next to the men's restroom in the parish hall, I was settling into a new job, a newly created position in the parish (hence, the remote location—no room in the office inn at that time). It was pretty quiet that first summer until people found their way to my off-the-beaten-track office.

Like Bill. A revert who had spent time in the evangelical world, he was on fire with the love of Jesus and wanted to be part of evangelizing his parish.

On this particular day, he was a man on a different mission. His mission, as he explained to me: he sought to hear God's voice. Oh, he prayed a lot, he assured me. He talked to God: in the morning, in his car as he traveled to and from work, in his prayer before meals, during his one hour of Eucharistic Adoration each week, in the evening before bed.

So, I asked what seemed like the obvious question, "So you say you talk to God several times, if not constantly, throughout the day. But when do you sit and listen for God to respond?"

Well, then the whole story came out: he tried to listen, but his thoughts kept invading his prayer: the to-dos, his worries, meandering thoughts kept invading the quiet. And, when he thought he heard God, well, he wasn't exactly sure, "Is it God or is it me?"

And so, I shared with him the quote at the top of this page. I proposed that we begin a journey together, listening to God as we pray with Scripture. We would pray and read a passage from the Bible in hopes to hear God speak to us in his Word.

We began meeting once a week for a few months. In time, Bill began to hear God speak to him through the Scriptures. Sometimes it was insights, images, or words that simply came to mind but not necessarily a voice. He then began to recognize this same communication in his prayer. As he went about his day, at home and work, he found the words and insights of his prayer began to influence how he approached activities, his relationships with people. This, in turn, helped deepen his relationship with God. Over time, the fear that surrounded his prayer life when we met lessened considerably.

Bill would eventually go on, with a fellow parishioner, to found and lead a group for other men who were looking for what he found: a way to hear the still, small voice of God, carried in many different ways to the ears of our hearts.

It was experiences such as this, with individuals and small groups over the past fifteen years that led me, with God's help, to create this resource for individuals, small groups, and parishes.

The method is nothing new: it is adapted from the ancient practice of Lectio Divina which I will explain in a moment.

The difference is I have modified it based upon my own experience and what Sherry Weddell has learned about the spiritual development of post-modern people, much of which she writes about in her book, *Forming Intentional Disciples*. This guide will explain the background as well as offer tips on how to use this resource with individuals, small groups, or as a whole parish exercise.

What is Lectio Divina?

Lectio Divina literally means “divine reading.” It is an opportunity, in prayerful reading, to encounter the living God in the text before us, in our case, a passage from the Bible. The expression can be found as early as the fourth and fifth century in the works of the Church Fathers. St. Ambrose was but one; it is also used by Ss. Jerome, Augustine, and Hilary of Poitiers. The Carthusians referred to *Lectio Divina* as a school of Christ where the goal is to form the Christian so that they may more fully live in Christ.

Many of the exhortations to the practice of *Lectio Divina* are addressed to cloistered monks, which left some with the impression that the Scriptures were not meant for lay people.

Another Church Father, St. John Chrysostom countered that assumption thusly:

What are you saying, man? That attending to the Scriptures is not for you, since you are surrounded by a multitude of cares? Rather it is for you more than for them. They do not need the help of the divine Scriptures as much as those do who are involved in many occupations. The monks, who are released from the clamor of the marketplace and have fixed their huts in the wilderness, who own nothing in common with anyone, but practice wisdom without fear in the calm of the quiet life, as if resting in a harbor, enjoy great security; but we, as if tossing in the midst of the sea, driven by a multitude of sins, always need continuous and ceaseless aid of the Scriptures. They rest far from the battle, and so they do not receive many wounds; but you stand continuously in the front rank, and you receive continual blows. So you need more remedies.[1]

The format we often see used today, sometimes called the four pillars of *Lectio Divina*, is attributed to Guigo II the Carthusian, a 12th century monk and 9th prior at Grande Chartreuse monastery. In his letter to a fellow monk, *Scala Claustralium*, sometimes known as “The Ladder of Four Rungs” or “The Monk’s Ladder,” he described a four-part method: *Lectio, Meditatio, Oratio* and *Contemplatio*.[2]

Lectio. This is a slow, prayerful reading of the chosen text at least twice. He recommends reading it several times. He also advises read the text aloud so that one not only reads with the eyes but hears the Word spoken with the ear. This is a plain-sense reading of the text, paying attention to the what it says. It is best to avoid the use of a commentary at this point and simply stay with the text alone.

[1]St. John Chrysostom, *On Wealth and Poverty Discourse III*, p. 55. GLH Publishing Reprint, 2018. Kindle Edition.

[2]Guigo II the Carthusian, “The Ladder of Four Rungs,” <http://www.umilta.net/ladder.html>. February 14, 2019.

Meditatio. “The more the Word of God is chewed in the mouth, the more sweetly It is savored in the heart.” Oger of Lecedio, Cistercian monk. This is a time dedicated to truly pondering the text. Many saints and scholars use the image of chewing the Word to describe how to approach *meditatio*. Guigo recommends this prayer before embarking upon this step: “Lord Jesus, Son of the living God, O living Word, teach me to eat and to assimilate your Gospel so that it may transform me and make my spirit become entirely conformed to what you are and to what you will.”[3] This is a time to ponder the text: was there a word, phrase or image that stood out for you? What do you think God is trying to say to you in this? It is not a time to look for concrete applications to one’s life to but to ponder, “What is God saying to me, in this time and this place, in this text?”

Oratio. Guigo recommends this prayer as you begin this step: “Lord Jesus, Son of the living God, teach my heart to speak to the Father, with whom you continually converse in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Pierce my heart with the love that unites it to the Father, and be yourself continual prayer in me.”[4] The movement in this step is beyond the text, to adoration of Jesus Christ. Some people imagine themselves sitting at the feet of Jesus and say to Jesus what has arisen in their prayer, what is on their heart.

Contemplatio. The operative word for *contemplatio* is rest. To rest and listen for God to respond to the prayers of one’s heart. This is resting beyond the text, beyond your thoughts, quietly resting in the presence of God for what God may have to share with you, heart to heart. Guigo suggested this prayer prior to contemplatio: “Lord Jesus, Son of the Living God, make my heart thirst for a love so great that your Spirit may give me a share in the communion of the love of the three divine persons in the silence which transcends every word and every feeling.”[5]

Note: some suggest that the distinction between *Oratio* and *Contemplatio* is artificial and may prove an obstacle to fruitful prayer. They find they move back and forth between them as the dialogue with God develops. Thus, you may wish to look at these two pillars as movement within a single step.

For the beginner: where to begin?

Guigo offers wise counsel on where beginners should start: “The first degree is for beginners, the second for those profiting from it, the third for those who are devout, the fourth for those who are holy and blessed of God.”[6] He reminds the reader that those who are more advanced never leave the earlier steps behind: one always begins with Lectio but simply moves farther up the ladder as their prayer life matures.

Guigo’s counsel is wise, indeed. For many in our parishes, encountering God in the Scriptures by Lectio Divina is a new idea. In fact, as Sherry Weddell notes in her books, in particular, *Forming Intentional Disciples*, the vast majority of “active” Catholics are at the early, passive spiritual thresholds of trust or curiosity.[1] With the advent of parishes intentionally offering evangelizing experiences, we are beginning to hear reports of people moving into curiosity, a few into early openness.

[3] Ghislaine Salvail, *At the Crossroads of the Scriptures: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*. Trans. By Paul C. Duggan. Boston: Pauline Books & Media, 1994. P. 47

[4] *Ibid*, 51.

[5] *Ibid*, 56.

[6] Guigo II the Carthusian, “Ladder.”

[7] Sherry A. Weddell, *Forming Intentional Disciples*, p. 151

For parishes that are seeing people move into late curiosity, they find that moving into spiritual openness is a challenge. And it makes sense: in spiritual curiosity, I am beginning to consider that it is possible to have a personal relationship with God in principle. However, the shift that needs to happen to cross into spiritual openness is that I come to realize that a personal relationship with God is possible for me.

As Sherry notes, this is the toughest transition to make because it is the place where defenses are highest.[8] As Bill and I began to meet, I realized that part of his struggle to hear God speak to him was a fear of what he might hear him say—and how he might be challenged to respond.

Bill is not alone: in a year-long survey conducted by Pew, 84% of Catholics polled said they talk with God or some Higher Power but only 23% said God or the Higher Power talks to me.[9] This is a critical step for one moving into spiritual openness, to be open and desire not only to talk to God but also to be open to his response.

Pray with Scripture, Meet God is designed to meet people in spiritual curiosity where they are, and provide this most critical space where they can take what may be the first tentative steps into a personal relationship in which they not only talk to, but listen for God's response. This space is found in the second pillar, *Meditatio*. For this reason, *Pray with Scripture, Meet God* focuses on these first two pillars only: *Lectio* and *Meditatio*. This is a perfectly legitimate approach to this particular spiritual discipline. No doctrine of the Church requires us to practice all four pillars and the rule of thumb Jesus give us is that rules are made for man, not man for rules (cf. Mark 2:27).

Does this mean that someone who is farther along the thresholds cannot benefit from it? Absolutely not. In practice, we find that those who are in openness, seeking or intentional discipleship, will, on their own, extend the practice beyond the first two pillars almost instinctively.

What is *Pray with Scripture, Meet God*?

Pray with Scripture, Meet God is a two-part resource designed to be used by individuals and small groups as well as for a whole parish experience. It is published as a multi-week series, focused on a particular liturgical season or theme. Each series consists of several two-page documents, one for each week of the series. Page One is the first part of the resource for that week; Page Two is the second part.

Page One

The first page of each week's resource is for individuals to use daily during the week. On the left side is the passage for the week, broken out over five days. Each day the individual will pray with the verses for that day, using the format in the box on the right side.

Most weeks, the last day is a reading of the complete passage for the week. This presentation of a few verses at a time followed by a day with the complete passage allows the participant to spiritually "chew" on God's Word, savoring its meaning for them for the day.

[8]Ibid, 130.

[9]Pew Research Center, April 25, 2018, "When Americans Say They Believe in God, What Do They Mean?"

<https://www.pewforum.org/2018/04/25/when-americans-say-they-believe-in-god-what-do-they-mean/>. May 20, 2019

A few insights from those who have used this process:

Encourage those who are using *Pray with Scripture, Meet God* to keep a journal and note how their responses to praying with God's Word change over time.

The process outlined in the box can be adapted to begin a parish meeting in prayer. This is sometimes called the First 15 as it can be accomplished in about 15 minutes. In that setting, the complete passage for the week is often read once. One of the reflection questions on the sheet can then be used for a time of brief sharing with one or two others.

This page for the week can be included as a bulletin insert to encourage people to take up the Scriptures in prayer. It could also be left in a literature rack for people to pick up as they enter or leave the church.

Some have asked, "Why not include the Scripture passage on the handout?" There are several reasons for this:

1. It is simpler to copy and uses fewer resources to keep it to one sheet of paper.
2. Copyright law limits how much can be reproduced in a given resource.
3. Individuals or groups have the freedom to use the Bible translation of their choosing.
4. More important than those: The goal of *Pray with Scripture, Meet God* is to encourage ordinary Catholics to take up the Bible and pray. It is our hope that, after some weeks praying with the given passages, they will explore more of the Bible, praying as they go.
5. Keep in mind that you may have to help members of your community acquire a Bible for this prayer. Many Catholic bookstores can help you purchase basic Bibles in bulk that you can provide to your parishioners at a reasonable cost. You may also wish to post on your website links to online sources for translations that work for your community. Note: most communities choose to use the same translation that is used in their lectionary for Mass.
6. Some parishioners may need help at first looking up verses in the Bible. Here are how some parishes have done this:
 - A. They have had teens available after Mass to offer quick tutorials to adult parishioners (sometimes on weekends that Bibles are being offered for sale).
 - B. A handout can be provided in the literature rack or an article in the bulletin explaining how to find a verse in the Bible.
 - C. There are also some excellent videos online that show how to look up verses in the Bible.

Part Two

The second part of the resource is a meeting outline that can be used by a small group. It is designed as a companion to the individual resource. Some things to keep in mind:

- The meeting outline is always included as the second page of the weekly resource. We include it in this fashion so that it could be part of the bulletin insert for parishes who wish to encourage people to gather in small groups and discuss the passage. If you do not wish to use it, simply print Page One of the weekly resources for your bulletin insert.
- The meeting structure presumes each member has been praying with the passage over several days prior to coming to the meeting. Thus, everyone in the small group should have, for each week, both pages of *Pray with Scripture, Meet God*.

- There are several places that call for silence. Especially at the beginning, this may be uncomfortable for some members of your group. 30 seconds may be sufficient at the beginning, 2-3 minutes as they become more comfortable with this form of prayer.
- You may wish, if appropriate in your parish setting, to begin or end your meeting in front of the Blessed Sacrament, whether in the tabernacle in the Church or in a separate chapel. Check with your pastor as to what is permissible in your parish. If your parish has an adoration chapel, the coordinator may need to let the hour's adorers know you are coming so that they can expect company during their time with Jesus!
- As with any group, your small group leaders may need a tutorial or refresher on:
 1. How to establish ground rules;
 2. Encourage participation by everyone;
 3. Manage challenging members of the group.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by joining my hopes for your community to the hopes expressed by Benedict XVI in *Verbum Domini*:

“...I express my heartfelt hope for the flowering of “a new season of greater love for sacred Scripture on the part of every member of the People of God, so that their prayerful and faith-filled reading of the Bible will, with time, deepen their personal relationship with Jesus”. 72

And by Pope Francis in *Joy of the Gospel*:

“There is one particular way of listening to what the Lord wishes to tell us in His Word and of letting ourselves be transformed by the Spirit. It is what we call *lectio divina*. It consists of reading God’s Word in a moment of prayer and allowing it to enlighten and renew us...

He always invites us to take a step forward, but does not demand a full response if we are not yet ready. He simply asks that we sincerely look at our life and present ourselves honestly before Him, and that we be willing to continue to grow, asking from Him what we ourselves cannot as yet achieve.” 153

May spending time in prayerful reading of the Bible enlighten us, renew us, and deepen our personal relationship with Jesus! Amen!