

## Organising Group Meetings

There are many things that make it possible for a *lectio divina* group to be fruitful and hence be what one might call “a success”.

The desire to listen to God is pure grace, described elsewhere in this pack in the section entitled *What is lectio divina?*

The founding of a group to pray and listen to scripture (which we call *lectio divina*) may occur under any sort of circumstances and it is unhelpful to try to circumscribe how this may take place since this would theoretically place limits upon the capacity of the Holy Spirit, an ill-fated presumption!

However a few carefully-weighed words about the way a group meets and works may be helpful to those seeking guidance. Also, in the section entitled *Starting out*, one possible way of initiating a group within a parish is described. A group may be founded when a few people are determined enough to learn together.

### Leadership

Within any group a leadership component will be present and should not be denied just for the sake of political correctness. There are many ministries within the church and some people, at certain times, are called to leadership. How a group comes to identify this ministry and for what period of time is beyond the bounds of this pack to dictate.

The Benedictine tradition, that monastic tradition with which the LCSB identifies, could be the inspiration for a model of leadership within the group. Benedict encourages monks to obedience, not only to their abbot but also to each other (RB71).

The communities of the New Testament are also inspirational for our approach to the role of leader. While we may balk at the idea of handing over too much control to one person we may find if we take the plunge that progress in a chosen direction is swifter with greater potential for development. There are gems to be found throughout the Rule for anyone who is called to the service of leadership and the LCSB encourages leader(s) to be inspired by the words to the Abbot in chapters 2 and 64 of the Rule.

### Prayer

The members would do well to undertake to pray regularly for the group and all its members to be conformed to God through the Word, knowing that without the vine holding the branches together there will be no fruit (Jn 15:1-8).

### Dos and Donts for Leaders

The leaders are NOT taking on roles as spiritual directors, or preachers, but they do have a responsibility to the members of the group during meetings. This includes a few “basics” such as

- Keeping in touch with group members, to know who will be attending, and who will not
- Listening to group members’ responses during the *lectio divina*, in particular to identify needs, fears, joys, etc. [See section on Preparation for a Convivencia, Spiritual Requirements, for why this is important].
- Staying in touch with those unable to attend for a period (e.g. due to illness).

Thus, praying for the group members on a regular basis will form a solid foundation to ensure adequate support and care is provided for all and that “absent brethren” can be prayed for in the intercessions, knowing their needs and prayer requests.

## The Rule of St Benedict

Whilst knowledge of the Rule of St Benedict is not essential for the running of lectio divina groups, spending time getting to know the Rule can be of great help to group leaders. Benedict's life was founded on a profound listening to the word of God such that scripture known and lived seems to pour from his pen in the writing of the Rule: lectio divina is about a living according to the Word (heard and obeyed) and so is the Rule.

St Benedict has much to say about prayer and the spiritual life. The following Chapters of the Rule are suggested as starting points for *lectio divina* groups:

The Prologue	For Listening, and hastening to hear the word of God
Chapter 1	For recognising that we need to seek God in stable community
Chapter 2	For guidance on the behaviour of leaders!
Chapter 6	When to speak ... and when to keep silence
Chapter 19	On discipline in our prayer
Chapter 20	On reverence in our prayer
Chapter 38	Some thoughts when selecting readers for group <i>lectio divina</i>
Chapter 48	Setting aside time for prayerful reading
Chapter 50	For those who are unable to attend a group meeting
Chapter 53	For hosts of meetings, on the welcome of guests
Chapter 72	Bear with one another ... putting nothing before Christ

(This list is not exhaustive and other passages may be of equal or greater value).

This author has found much use for material in Chapters 19, 20 and 48 when working / praying in group *lectio divina*. Chapters 19 and 20 say a lot about personal attentiveness to the word of God (listening is the most important action in lectio divina), whilst Chapter 48 is useful in explaining the need for regular meetings (establishing the rhythm of prayer).

## Individual meetings

### Locations

Finding a suitable location for *lectio divina* is vital. The following should be considered:

- Is the venue available every week at the required time?
- Is the venue comfortable (chairs, heating, ventilation)?
- Can all those in the group get in and out easily?
- Is it possible to create a "Holy Space"?
- Is the venue quiet and free from serious distractions?

Some groups find that the stability of a regular venue is helpful to inhibit distractions and allow a group to get comfortable with a familiar surroundings. Others find variety of venue is simply the only possible arrangement and this exigency shouldn't discourage a group from starting.

### Holy Space

The meeting venue will need a focal point around which the group gathers. As *lectio divina* is about hearing and receiving the word of God, it is entirely appropriate that the focus should be a Bible, Book of Gospels or lectionary. Placing such a book on a small table or stand with a candle, crucifix or icon(s) can create a simple focal point. For the liturgically minded, using cloths to cover the table, coloured according to the season of the church, can add to the Holy Space.

## Setting the Programme for meetings

When a regular *lectio divina* group is established, the times of meetings should remain fixed. A stable rhythm of meeting will help the group members to settle into a pattern which may include their own personal preparation time before attending the meeting.

The programme for the meeting should respond to the groups requirements. The group should set the start and end times for the meeting and the leader should be responsible for ensuring that people's needs are respected. Some groups may be composed of people who have plenty of flexibility but it may be very important for some group members to leave on time (e.g. due to provision of child care). So, for example, for an evening group:

7.30pm	Gathering, welcome, drinks
7.45pm	Introduction by leaders (a few words about lectio divina and / or the passage to be read).
	Introductory prayer
	Lectio divina
	Shared prayer (intercessions)
8.30pm	Group 'social time' – (may serve drinks here)
	This time may include conversation about the passage, but must not turn into a conversation about what was said during the <i>lectio divina</i> .
9.00pm	Depart

In this model, about 30 minutes is set aside for lectio divina in a meeting of 90 minutes.

Whatever happens the programme mustn't become a dictator that no longer serves our essential need, which is to come together in faith to the foot of the cross to be healed by the Word amongst us. If the care for the members has gone and been replaced by a timetable it is very unlikely that the group will discover the radical message of God hidden within scripture.

## Selecting Scripture Passage(s) for Group *lectio divina*

There are plenty of ways in which texts may be selected. A few examples follow.

Probably the best option for parish based groups is to use the Gospel reading for the following Sunday. This allows the group members to:

- Hear and pray with the text that they will encounter at their Sunday liturgy.
- Remain firmly rooted in the spiritual life of the Parish
- Follow the Church seasons (and major feast days)

As an alternative, the group may select from other readings for the following Sunday (Old or New testament), readings of the day, readings for a recent or forthcoming feast day, etc.

In addition to the options based on fixed liturgical material, those meeting for *lectio divina* outside regular parish structures (e.g. interdenominational groups), may wish to select their passages by alternative methods. For example:

- Select a book from the bible, and "start at the beginning ..."
- Select a "spiritual theme" and work with a series of passages related to the theme:
  - o For Advent – prophetic writings on the coming of the Messiah
  - o In Lent – on repentance
  - o For Eastertide – on Resurrection and spreading the Gospel
  - o For other seasons – "Jesus ... bread of Life ... healer ... teacher"

## Groups for Young People

Leaders of groups for young people would do well to select specific readings. These should respond to the fast-changing currents of ideas and questions that occupy more-especially the young mind. A theme can either be followed for a few weeks and then changed or one off ideas can inspire the search for a reading each week, eg. mission, vocation, social action, sexuality, grief, etc.

During the 'strong' liturgical times, ie Lent, Easter, Advent, Christmas, follow a text appropriate to the time. This is especially helpful for young people to become accustomed to the liturgical year.

For a group which wishes to make a Benedictine excursion for a few weeks, a topic such as obedience, service, stability, penitence or other such topic can be chosen and then a scriptural reference from the Rule can lead to a reading to illuminate this aspect of the Benedictine charism. With respect to this method, also see the section on Convivencias. Some members of the lectio divina pack development group have specific experience on how to do this. Please enquire.

It would be necessary in cases where a series of related groups are following their own timetable of readings for leadership meetings to take place periodically to look at selecting the next round of readings.

## Leaders Preparation Time

There are groups which don't have a leader and place no responsibility upon anyone to prepare for the meeting. But the majority recognise that for the group to advance it is very important that it is clear who is going to lead the next meeting (it can be the same person every week for extended periods) and that that person affords an adequate amount of time for preparing. Some people claim that it is better to "let the Spirit lead" but this is normally just a good excuse. The people who give of themselves and motivate the prayer better by going with the flow and not preparing are few and far between.

## Length of passage

Which ever method is used to select a passage, attention must be paid to the length of the text and the time it will take to read and re-read. Depending on the method used for *lectio divina*, it may be inappropriate to attempt to use very long passages in group situations where a lot of "personal speaking time" is needed.

Under these circumstances the following may be appropriate

- Use the "shorter forms of the reading only
- Read the full version first, and then the shorter form only for the period of relection
- Carefully select a subsection of the text and agree with the group that this will be used

If the text cannot readily be cut down, then it may better to agree to use the whole passage, but to cut down on introductory words at the beginning of the evening, and to allow the period of *lectio divina* to run on a little longer than normal. Whatever happens, do not be afraid to use only some of the text – *lectio divina* doesn't require a complete story and is not improved by reading a longer passage. However, it is an error to edit out verses here and there.

Finally, do respect the agreed finishing time!