

That's the Book For Me

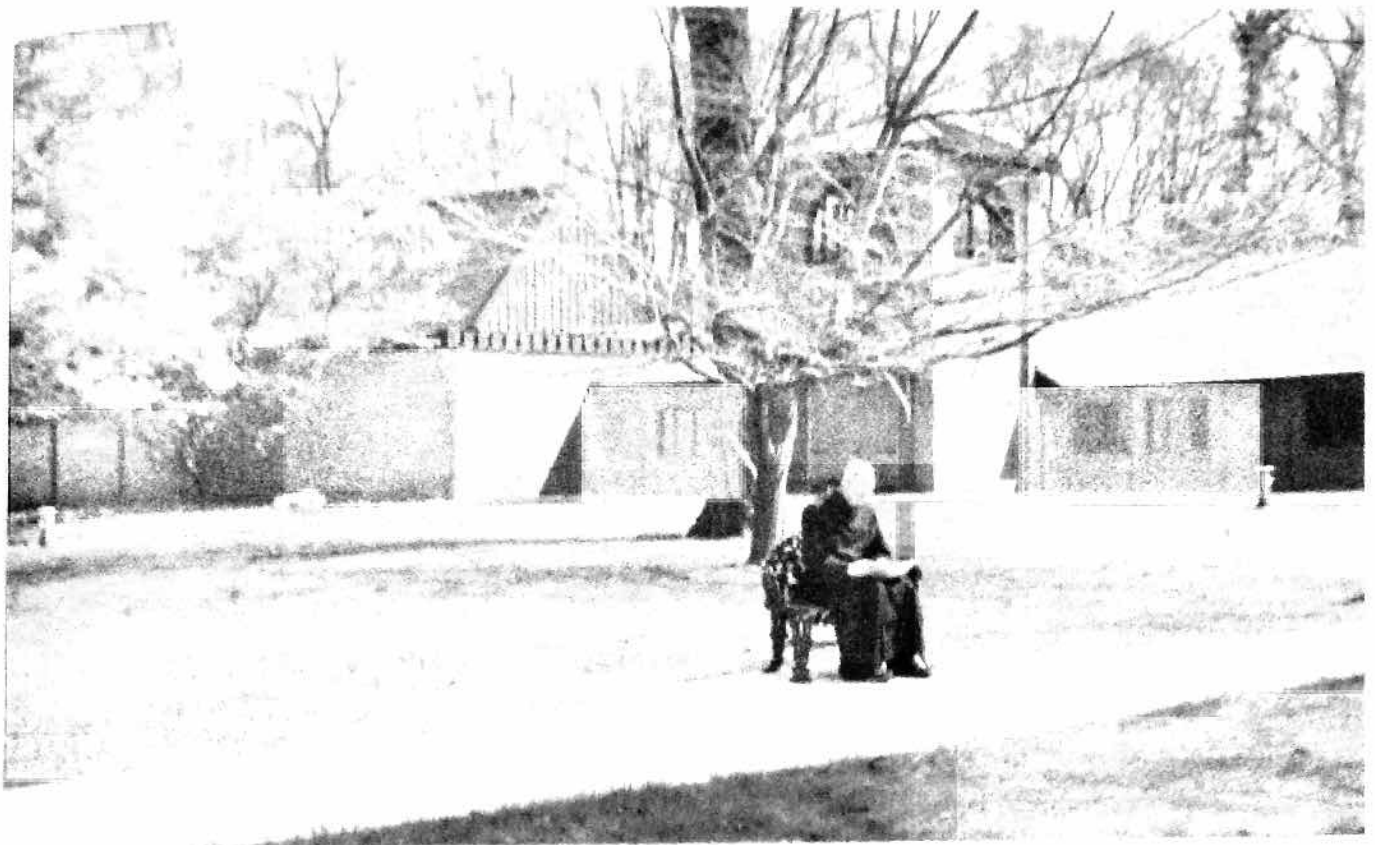
When I entered the monastery, I was given a reading list with the names and authors of several books that would be of help during my formation years and beyond (postulancy, novitiate, temporary profession, and life profession). The books were all in our library here at the abbey, and covered topics such as scripture interpretation, prayer, monastic practices, church history, and monastic history. Along with all the books and authors listed was a sentence at the top of the paper: "Scripture is to be read daily."

Eventually I did read all of the books on the reading list. Many of them deeply impressed me and have had a lasting impact on my thoughts, words, and deeds. Of course, I have kept reading other books from our wonderful and large library, and many of those have also led to much needed change in my life through the years. I have contacted many of the authors (when possible) and have let them know of my gratitude for their works. More importantly, I have also continued the daily practice of half-hour scripture reading sessions throughout my time in the monastery, a discipline which has led to even greater positive changes in my life.

The technical term for a certain monastic style of scripture reading is *lectio divina*, which simply means "divine reading." *Lectio divina* is usually considered to be a prayerful reading of scripture done to foster growth as a Christian, rather than academic reading or study (one guest at the monastery described academic reading as interpreting scripture and *lectio divina* as allowing scripture to interpret us). I was never given any guidance on how to do it, other than the fact that it was expected of me as a monk. The reason there was no "technique" given to me for *lectio divina* was the fact that it is a highly personal practice, in contrast to our communal readings at Matins, Eucharist, and Compline, which are done in a corporate setting and so have a certain necessary uniformity (as do other aspects of corporate prayer). Because of the corporate nature of our communal prayer, it is important that our personal prayer and scripture reading be as private and as personal as possible.

There have been several books written and retreats offered that promote certain techniques for *lectio divina*. Some of these are helpful, but sometimes people get so worried about following the prescribed "steps" that they never actually get any prayerful reading done. I came up with a way that works for me before I knew there were certain prescribed "steps." The important thing is to read with an open mind and heart and allow the Holy Spirit to speak to us as we read. Some people dwell on short passages or phrases (even individual words), while others profit more from reading long stories or treatises from scripture and musing over the narrative or content of the treatise. Some people read through the Bible from front to back, others read a certain book or books of the Bible over and over.

Reading the Bible in a prayerful way has led me to realize that most of it is not about God. Rather, it is about people's relationships to God, to each other, and to themselves. Many of those relationships were not good and are recorded as warnings for us, while many others were good and were recorded as ways of life to be emulated. As I read, I compare my life with the stories and am often confronted with actions and attitudes in myself that need to change. The danger of espousing



certain behaviors because they are “in the Bible” has become apparent — if something is “in the Bible”, it is likely to be there as a warning to not ever try it again. *Lectio divina* has been a good way of discerning between “prescribed,” “described,” and “proscribed” behavior in scripture.

The practice of *lectio divina* through the years has led not only to inner change that has affected my outward behavior for the better; it has also given me a source of Biblical wisdom that can be used to help people, rather than the all-too-common practice of using single verses or parts of verses to condemn people whom we fear because they seem to be different from us. Having a large well of scriptural insight is a good reason to read all of the Bible, not just certain parts (at least it helps when conversing with people who use small bits of scripture to condemn people — when I ask them if they have read the entire Bible, they usually say no, so I can reply to them that until they do so I can not accept their argument as being truly Biblically based.)

It is not always easy to find time for a discipline of prayerful scripture reading, but it is worth the effort. It is also not easy to understand the Bible — it was compiled over many centuries and contains stories from several cultures spanning thousands of years on at least three continents, but we ought not to let that hinder our practice. Many Bibles have good introductions to each individual book as well as helpful footnotes. An abundance of knowledge is not necessary, but a little familiarity is helpful. Several translations are also available, and formats can be found ranging from simple hard copy or electronic versions to highly decorated and illustrated versions. The translation, format, time, and place are all up to the individual. The important thing is to do it — any attempt will be met with grace and will lead to greater and greater change in our lives as we open up to listen with the ear of our heart.

— Br. Abraham