

What is the better part?

In the Gospel of Luke 10:38-42, Jesus told Martha that she was “anxious and worried about many things” but that “Mary has chosen the better part.” In the Scripture passage, the better part is that Mary “sat beside the Lord at His feet listening to Him speak.” This is not the usual image that comes to mind when we think of prayer. Let’s take a closer look.

A relationship involves conversation between two people

Each of us desires to know God’s personal direction for his or her life. Sometimes, it’s a yearning to know the big picture. More frequently, it’s a crisis-oriented cry for help regarding the practical decisions we are faced with on a daily basis. But whether we realize it or not, more than a word of guidance, what we really need is to know the Guide. More than the answer to a specific prayer, what really matters is knowing that Jesus has heard our cry and we have somehow sensed His Presence. The relationship with Him is what really counts.

Prayer is our way of establishing a relationship with Jesus, and this relationship with Him is unique and personal for each of us. If we love someone, we look forward to creating opportunities to communicate with the beloved, as well as just being with this person. It is the same with God. The initial invitation for this relationship comes from Jesus as a gift, a grace bestowed on us by a loving God. Hence He is continually looking for ways and occasions that we are open to His ever-present availability to us.

So how can we dispose our hearts to hear from the Lord personally? How does He speak directly, concretely, recognizably to our hearts? More importantly, how can we learn to spend time with, be with Jesus, not for something we can get but simply because of Who He is. One of the best ways to answer these questions is “to *pray* with Scripture.”

Lectio Divina, which is Latin for Divine Reading, is a way of praying with Scripture in which we encounter the Person of Christ. In praying with a Bible passage, we have a privileged meeting place with Jesus. (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 2708) In praying with Scripture, the progression that takes place is not a technique but a way that incorporates the natural development of a relationship between two friends. This way of praying with the Word of God is also not a method of human invention but derives from the way that God has touched and drawn human hearts into relationship with Himself down through the ages. It happens automatically as we sincerely spend time with the Word of God. However, an awareness and understanding of the progression can help our participation in it.

A relationship deepens through progression

Let’s examine the progression of how a relationship develops. Think of a person that you truly love and trust, such as a spouse, friend, sibling, or grandparent. How does a relationship begin? In talking and spending time with the person, your conversation might initially be a bit superficial.

How does the relationship develop? Your conversation begins to include sharing what you think about things. As the relationship deepens, your trust grows and develops, and you now feel comfortable relating how you feel about things. Communication is now at the heart level; if the friend moves, you would really miss him; you would mourn her loss because you have shared your heart with this person. After talking a lot about how you feel, eventually you are able to sit in a room with the person and no words need to be spoken. The relationship is now at that deep level where you feel totally comfortable with no outward communication and just being present to each other is very calming. An example is being in a boat on a pond with your grandfather, just sitting there, totally at peace. There is a sense of communion; words could even disrupt this peaceful communion.

This is what God desires with each one of us. This is the same progression that we find in praying with Scripture using *Lectio Divina*. Talking, spending time with and getting to know Jesus takes place in reading a particular Scripture passage. Sharing what you think comes about in reflecting on the Scripture passage by re-telling it in a few short sentences, in other words summarizing it. Relating how you feel takes place in spontaneous prayer as you answer three, simple questions that lead you to become personally involved with the passage. This spontaneous prayer fosters a movement from your head to your heart as the Holy Spirit makes a connection between the persons and events in the Scripture and your own personal life by reminding you of something from last week, last year, or perhaps a very long time ago. Finally, the peaceful communion with no outward communication develops through simply resting in God, being in His Presence and listening to what Jesus might whisper to your heart through a thought or a word. This is a beautiful way to encounter Our Lord in the words of Scripture.

A one-page prayer worksheet with simple directions is available for your use. Go to diolc.org/prayingwithScripture. This way of praying with Scripture can be used even with very small children.

Take time to experience the prayerful pondering of sacred Scripture. Benedict XVI, Pope Emeritus, recommends “the ancient tradition of *Lectio Divina*: the diligent reading of sacred Scripture accompanied by prayer brings about that intimate dialogue in which the person reading hears God who is speaking, and in praying, responds to Him with trusting openness of heart...This practice will bring to the Church – I am convinced of it – a new spiritual springtime.” (Pope Benedict’s address to the International Congress commemorating the 40th Anniversary of *Dei Verbum*, September 16, 2005.)

By Ann Lankford, Director for Catechesis and Evangelization, Diocese of La Crosse, WI and Carol Lankford, consecrated virgin and spiritual director