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Using *Lectio Divina* in a Support Group for Pre – Seminarians

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Using *Lectio Divina* in a Support Group for Pre – Seminarians

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Nowadays, living in the communist society in Vietnam, two of the main issues that need attention in preparation of the candidates in the one- year pre-seminary program are developing their habits of prayer and strengthening their skills needed for a rich community life. For this reason, the project *Using Lectio Divina in a Support Group for Pre – Seminarians* was designed to help the candidates become accustomed to seminary life.

This project will consist of an eight-week workshop. Each weekly session will last for two hours. The candidates have a chance to look back at traditional prayer in Church history included *lectio divina* to show the importance of prayer in the process of priestly formation as well as in the life of ministers. They will learn the way to practice *Lectio Divina* both in personal prayer and in the small group. This project will also offer them an opportunity to learn the skills needed to live in the community life and to practice these skills. This project is intended that the participants will demonstrate a growth in their prayer life and their relationship to God. By the power of the living Word of God, and by listening to others share in the group, they will hopefully increase in the fraternity and cooperation for community life.

Doing this project with twenty candidates who lived at the Saigon Archdiocesan Pastoral Institute in Vietnam in the first semester of the one- year pre-seminary program, the facilitator was confident of the project's benefits. From the participants' feedback,

this project had helped the participants to grow deeper in their relationship with God in their prayer life, and to go wide in their relationships with others in community life.

Hopefully, this project will also provide a specific means to the other pre-seminary year that to help the candidates to improve their prayer lives as well as prepare them for communal life.

This dissertation by Dung Ngoc Hoang fulfills the dissertation requirement for the doctoral degree in ministry approved by Donald Heet, D.Min, as Director, and by Stephen Rossetti, Ph.D, D.Min. as Reader.

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INTRODUCTION

Priestly formation is important in the life of the Church because the mission of renovating and developing the Church depends greatly on the pastoral ministry of its priests. Recently, there have been conferences, workshops, studies, and research about priestly formation and training for seminary directors of formation and their staffs. These events show how important the seminary is to the diocese, and the extent to which the bishops concern themselves about priestly formation programs.

In Vietnam numbers of vocations to the ministerial priesthood and the consecrated life continues to increase. This is a great gift of the love of God for the Vietnamese church. At the same time, this trend also requires the Bishop and formation staff to train priests with a concern for high quality rather than mere quantity. Growing up in a communist society in Vietnam, many people have missed the opportunity for a good Catholic religious foundation. Not only are they influenced by the materialism in the society, but the government discourages religious education. In that situation, although young men who have priestly vocations are good Christian men, they often lack the experience of putting time aside for prayer on a daily basis. Moreover, in Vietnamese culture and psychology, effective teamwork is not an easy model to practice. Looking back on the process of priestly formation and its relationship to the actual tasks of a priest in the parish, two issues were raised among the Vietnamese bishops: a concern for the prayer life of the priest, as expressed by his homily each day; and a concern about priestly fraternity in working with the bishop, other priests, and parishioners. For this

reason and following the May 10, 1998 Vatican document *Il Periodo Propedeutico* of the Congregation for the Catholic Education of the Seminaries and the Institutes of Studies, a one year pre-seminary program has been in place since 2006 in the Archdiocese of Saigon. This program was designed to help the candidates to better adjust to seminary life.

In particular, Bishop Peter Kham V. Nguyen, Auxiliary Bishop of the Saigon Archdiocese and director of *Archdiocesan Pastoral Institute* said that two of the main issues that need attention in preparation of the candidates are developing their habits of prayer and strengthening their skills needed for a rich community life. Future priests must actualize their prayer life in their ministry; they must learn to listen with discernment and to work in teams. In preparing for their future ministry, candidates need to develop themselves deeply in personal relationship with God in prayer and with others in order to work more effectively in priesthood.

In response, this project was proposed by the author and developed in collaboration with formators, at the direction of the Bishop. It offered a workshop called *Using Lectio Divina in a Support Group* to candidates who lived at the Saigon Archdiocesan Pastoral Institute in Vietnam during the first semester of their one-year pre-seminary program. The goals of the project that were prompted by the needs of spiritual formation included: (1) helping candidates to develop the habit of daily meditation on the Scriptures using *lectio divina*; (2) hearing God's communication to them on their journey of vocation and coming to know God more personally; (3) promoting collaboration and community life in the development of mutual trust,

communication, and sharing. *Lectio divina*, especially group *lectio divina*, is especially suited to achieving these goals.

This study presents a specific, detailed program to help attain these goals. The first chapter is a short introduction about the foundations of a pre-seminary program, looking back on the history of the Vietnamese Catholic Church, the process and experiences of priestly formation there, and particularly in the Archdiocese of Saigon. It also shows the importance of the pre-seminary program in the current Vietnamese social situation. Chapter II presents a brief history of Christian prayer, with a focus on *lectio divina*. In addition, it provides historical methods of actual practice of *lectio divina*, both in private and in community. Chapter III focuses on community life in priestly formation. Specific skills to improve fraternity in community life are addressed in this chapter. Chapter IV gives a report of the project, as worked in *the Saigon Archdiocesan Pastoral Institute* in Vietnam (October 15, 2009 – December 15, 2009) with twenty participants in their one-year pre-seminary program. Chapter V provides evaluation of the project by both the participants and the facilitator.

The project offers a methodology that is currently planned for adoption at St. Joseph Seminary and perhaps other pre-seminaries in Vietnam, to overcome the effects of cultural materialism and political limitations on the practice of religion. It provides a specific means by which the pre-seminary year can improve the prayer lives of the candidates as well as prepare them for communal life. In this way it is expected to facilitate a smoother transition to the demands of life in the seminary and in their priestly lives in parishes.

CHAPTER I

A FOUNDATION FOR PRE-SEMINARY PROGRAM

1. A Brief History of Vietnamese Catholicism

In the fifteenth century, Europeans, particularly the Portuguese, traveled by boat to every corner of the world including Asia. It was in the sixteenth century that the first Western Catholic missionaries, who accompanied some merchant ships, started their work in Vietnam. According to *Khâm Định Việt sử Thông giám Cương mục* (*The Imperially Ordered Mirror and Commentary on the History of the Viet*) edited by historian Ngô Sĩ Liên and his collaborators under the Lê Dynasty, I-ni-khu was the first missionary to enter Vietnam to preach the Gospel:

“In the first year of Nguyen Hoa under the Le Trang Tong Dynasty (March 1533), the false doctrine of Gia To [Jesus] preached by a man of the sea by the name of I-ni-khu [Ignatio] in the villages of Ninh Cuong and Quan Anh of the district of Nam Chan and in the villages of Tra Lu, of the district of Giao Thuy, in the province of Son Nam.”¹

As the result of civil war between the Mạc – Lê, Vietnam was subsequently divided in two: the North belonged to the Mạc dynasty (called Bắc Triều) whose capital was Thăng Long, the South to the Lê dynasty (called Nam Triều) whose capital was An Trường. In the northern kingdom, King Mạc Mậu Hiệp sent letters of invitation to the Franciscan Monastery in Macao and allowed Catholic missionaries into Vietnam with the hope of gaining support and aid from the Portuguese for his struggle against the Lê dynasty's forces, which were growing stronger than his. In 1585, Bartolome Ruiz, a

¹ Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis: Alexandre de Rhodes & Inculturation in 17th Century Vietnam* (New York, Orbis Books, 1998), 8.

Spanish Franciscan, became one of the first missionaries to Thăng Long. He used paintings as the means of preaching to all the people of the capital.² Evangelization in the early period (1533-1615) in Vietnam was sporadic. “Despite sporadic attempts by Dominican and Franciscan missionaries, no lasting imprints were left on the country. It was only with the arrival of the Jesuits in Cochinchina³ in 1615 that Christianity began to take root.”⁴

The evangelization in the south of Vietnam was started with the first Jesuits who came to Vietnam at Cửa Hàn (Đà Nẵng) on January 18, 1615. These two priests, Fathers Francesco Buzomi and Diego Carvalho, came with two Japanese lay-brothers as well.⁵ With his linguistic talents Buzomi learned to speak and to preach the native language; and being a virtuous priest, he attracted and affected a lot of people. At the end of his first year in Vietnam, Buzomi built two churches: one in Hải Phố, the other in Quảng Nam. The number of Christians was then three hundred.⁶ In response to the good results of Buzomi’s work, in 1617 three priestly Italian missionaries, Fernandez, Barretto, and Francisco de Pina and Brother Antonio Dias were sent to Quảng Nam to assist Buzomi. Sadly, their evangelization was hindered by the jealousy of the Vietnamese bonzes, the Buddhist monks, there. In December 1624, Alexandre de Rhodes and six other Jesuits arrived at Cửa Hàn (Đà Nẵng) to continue their evangelization in Đàng Trong (the area of southern Vietnam). De Rhodes spent one-and-a-half-years studying the native language

² Huon Phat Phan, *History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam* (Long Beach: Cuu The Tung Thu 2000), 20-21.

³ The name “Cochinchina” is the old name of the area of southern of Vietnam.

⁴ Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 10.

⁵ Sinh Duc Bui, *Lich Su Giao Hoi Cong Giao* (Saigon: Chan ly xuất bản: 1972), 316-17.

⁶ Ibid., 317.

with the goal of being able to read, to write, to hear confessions, and to preach in traditional Vietnamese language.⁷

De Rhodes had made an important contribution toward the establishment of an indigenous church in Vietnam. As a result of his efforts, on September 9, 1659 Pope Alexander VII issued the decree *Super Cathedram* to establish two apostolic vicariates – Đàng Trong, under the leadership of Pierre Lambert De La Motte, and Đàng Ngoài under François Pallu. This was an important day for the Vietnamese Catholics; the church of Vietnam was born.

In addition to the mission of Jesuits, one must acknowledge the French diocesan missionaries' attempts. To prepare for their mission in East Asia, in 1660 François Pallu and Lambert de la Motte established a seminary called Missions Étrangères de Paris [MEP], which was approved by the Holy See in 1664.⁸ In 1664, François Pallu came and met Lambert de la Motte, and they convoked an assembly in Ayutthaya (Thailand).⁹ Only two bishops, five priests and one lay person attended this assembly. The results can be summarized as follows:

(1) They planned to institute an apostolic congregation composed of three orders and this congregation would be named the Congregation of The Lovers of the Cross.

(2) They decided to publish the instructions to the Apostolic Vicars given by Propaganda Fide, as well as to issue the "Instructions to Missionaries."

⁷ Peter C. Phan, *Mission and Catechesis*, 46.

⁸ Missions étrangères et langues orientales, *Bibliographie de 1680 jusqu'à 1996. Contribution de la Société des missions étrangères à la connaissance de 60 langues d'Asie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1997), 7.

⁹ Huon Phat Phan, *History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 175.

(3) They agreed to the erection of a seminary.¹⁰

As a result, the first seminary was opened in Thailand in 1665 to train young men to become clerics for Vietnam.¹¹ It was from there that the first Vietnamese priests were ordained in 1668: Joseph Trang, John Huệ, Benedict Hiền, and Luca Bền.¹² In February, 1670, Lambert de la Motte founded the Lovers of the Holy Cross Congregation for virtuous women. These sisters' role to be the apostles to women was very important in the context of the local traditions hostile to men and women mixing together. Moreover, during the crucial period of persecution, their evangelizing activities were useful.¹³ By 1802, the Vietnamese Catholic Church was considered to have had a sufficiently stable structure for the formation of three dioceses:

- Diocese of Eastern North Vietnam: 140,000 members, 41 Vietnamese priests, 4 missionary priests, and 1 bishop.
- Diocese of Western North Vietnam: 120,000 members, 65 Vietnamese priests, 5 missionary priests, and 1 bishop.
- Diocese of Central and South Vietnam: 60,000 members, 15 Vietnamese priests, 5 missionary priests, and 1 bishop.¹⁴

The constant increase of followers as well as a wide development of evangelization led to the consecration of the first Vietnamese bishop, the Most Reverend John Baptist Nguyễn

¹⁰ Surachai Chumsriphan, *A Brief History Of The Catholic Church In Thailand* <http://www.sspxasia.com/Newsletters/2002/Oct-Dec> (accessed September 2004).

¹¹ Huon Phat Phan, *History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 176.

¹² Ibid., 202.

¹³ Jean Charbonnier, "Paris Foreign Missions Society," in *Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, ed. Scott W. Sunquist (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub., 2001), 637.

¹⁴ General Secretariate of the Episcopal Conference of Vietnam, *2004 Catholic Church of Vietnam Almanac* (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Tôn Giáo, 2004), 192.

Bá Tông, on June 11, 1933 at St. Peter's Basilica by Pope Pius XI, who installed him as the coadjutor bishop of Phát Diệm. In 1934, the first Indochinese council was held in Hà Nội with the participation of 19 bishops, five religious superiors, and 21 expert priests to discuss the establishment of a Vietnamese hierarchy, forming clergy and training the faith-life of lay people. A memorable and important event in the history of the Church of Vietnam occurred when, with the Apostolic Constitution *Venerabilium Nostrorum* issued on November 24, 1960, Pope John XXIII established the hierarchy of the Church in Vietnam that consisted of three ecclesiastical provinces: Hà Nội, Huế, Sài Gòn, and 17 dioceses.¹⁵

In the year 2010 the Vietnamese Church celebrated her Jubilee, marking the 350th anniversary of the establishment of the first two apostolic vicariates in Vietnam and the 50th anniversary of the setting up of the Vietnamese Catholic hierarchy. Looking back on this historical journey, one discovers the mystery of the Church – the mystery expressed in the parable of the tiny mustard seed (cf. Luke 13:18-19). When the seed of Good News was planted in Vietnam, being deeply rooted in faith and having grown into hope, it has become the mature tree that is large enough to give the shade of love to millions of people. In fact, the Vietnamese Church now has 26 dioceses with 6.2 million Catholics (6.7% of the population), 3,741 priests, 1,406 seminarians, 15,752 men and women in religious orders, and 56,698 catechists.¹⁶ Although it exists under the strict control of the communist government, there is a lot of hope and optimism for the future of the church in Vietnam. Among many signs of growth and revitalization, one must count the large

¹⁵ Ibid., 199.

¹⁶ General Secretariate of the Episcopal Conference of Vietnam, *Dấu Ấn 350 Năm Giáo Hội Công Giáo Việt Nam* (Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Phương Đông, 2010), 33.

numbers of converts to Catholicism and the many vocations to the priesthood and religious life. The main issue is quality not quantity: how to structure the priestly formation program in the seminary to form the men who will become priests who are healthy and holy in body, mind, and spirit.

2. Profile of the process of priestly formation in Vietnam

In the 17th century, the number of Vietnamese Christians increased. Therefore the need for native priests was predictable. The very sad evangelization experience in Japan had shown that the kings and political authorities, as well as the native people, feared that the great number of foreigners on their land might cause them to lose their national independence. As an unfortunate result, the Catholic Church in Japan was put through a tragic persecution and was essentially ended. Alexandre de Rhodes tried to prevent this tragedy from happening again in Vietnam. Consequently he attempted to select a number of Vietnamese men who were qualified catechists, currently working for the Jesuits, to train to become priests.¹⁷ The first four Vietnamese catechists who joined the Saint Joseph seminary in Ayutthaya (Thailand) were ordained priests in 1668. Two years later, the first council was held in Phố Hiến (Hưng Yên) with the six missionaries in attendance, the four Vietnamese priests, and a few catechists. They voted for the mission program, which included organizing parishes and establishing a priestly formation program under title “*Domus Dei*” - House of God. With the establishment of *Domus Dei*, each stable parish had an informal junior seminary where priestly vocations were cultivated. The competent young men would be sent to the seminary to continue being trained to become priests; others would undergo training to teach catechism. As the

¹⁷ Huon Phan Phat, *History of the Catholic Church in Vietnam*, 110-111.

result, even in the tense situation of persecution when the foreign missionaries had been expelled, there always were local clergy working their mission in the church. Up to 1679, there were also 13 ordained Jesuits who had received an official religious formation in Đàng Ngoài.¹⁸ These native priests increased in number and evangelized fruitfully.

In the process of instituting new dioceses, the bishops were concerned to set up minor seminaries in each diocese, preparing candidates for the major seminary through the system *Domus Dei*. At that time, building and organizing a seminary for each diocese was difficult; therefore, a system of inter-seminaries seemed to be a good remedy. Thanks to the *Missions Étrangères de Paris*, the Church made a tremendous inroad into Vietnamese society, even amidst many trials and difficulties. The French missionaries focused mainly on two goals: (i) the organization of the parish with two basic groups of catechists and leaders; (ii) the construction and maintenance of the seminaries for the purpose of training clergy. Elzéar des Achards de la Baume founded Saint Carolos Seminary at Thợ Đức (Huế) in the academic year 1740-1741, with 24 students. In 1860, Bishop Lefebvre assigned Théodore Louis Wibaux – a member of *Missions Étrangères de Paris* – as a rector and asked him to build and establish the diocesan seminary in Saigon. After six years, this seminary was finished and named Saint Joseph Seminary and was opened to train the first seminarian class in 1866.

The Sulpician spirituality, which is rooted in the 17th century French school, has had great influence in the Vietnamese priestly formation program. In 1929 the two first

¹⁸ Ibid., 205

Sulpician priests, Leon Paliard and Paul Uzureau, were invited to take care of the training program in the seminary of Hà Nội Archdiocese at Liễu Giai. This program opened on September 1, 1933. In 1954, Vietnam was divided into two parts under different political regimes: the North was controlled by the communist government and the South was under the republican government. Many priests of the North followed the exodus and flight of their faithful towards the South. The seminary of Hà Nội Archdiocese at Liễu Giai moved to the south of Vietnam at Vĩnh Long, Thị Nghè (Saigon). The bishops of Archdiocese of Huế asked the Sulpicians to run the seminary during the period 1962-1975. From 1975-1994, the seminaries were closed due to communist pressure, so the Sulpicians went to serve in parishes. On September 21, 1994, the seminary of Huế reopened and the Archbishop of Huế invited the Sulpicians to run this seminary again. There are many bishops and priests who have received their priestly formation in the tradition of the Sulpician Fathers.

In the South the need for priests had been increasing. Therefore on January 25, 1957, the Vietnamese Bishops sent a petition to the Holy See, requesting the establishment of an additional seminary for the formation of diocesan clergy. The Apostolic Delegate proposed the Jesuits set up a Pontifical Seminary for Vietnam, as well as for other countries in East Asia, in which all the teaching would be in French and Latin. As a result, on September 13, 1958 the Pontifical College St Pius X opened in Dalat (Vietnam), with 24 seminarians in formation under the direction of four Jesuit priests. In the following years, the formation staff was strengthened and the number of students increased, including students from Lao and Kampuchea. This seminary had

great influence with the Holy See as well as earning the respect of the Episcopal Conference of Vietnam. In 1975, the Communist take-over of the south of Vietnam meant foreign Jesuits were unable to remain in this country. In August, 1975, the Jesuits handed over this pontifical college to the Vietnamese Bishop. However, after only two years, in 1977, the government took away this pontifical college by force, expelling priest professors and students from the seminary. During those critical years (1958-1977), the number of priests who had been formed from this Pontifical Seminary was 318, of whom 14 became bishops.¹⁹

For a long time, the 1954 division of the country created a lack of priests in the North. Since 1975, the Vietnamese communist government has taken control of the most fundamental rights of the Church in both North and South of Vietnam. Furthermore, for many years, the government forbade the re-opening of the seminaries. This situation changed at the end of the eighties: in 1987, the Inter-diocesan Seminaries of Hà Nội and Saigon were reopened, at first sanctioning the entrance of new candidates only every six years. Then, in the nineties, they allowed entrance every three years, and a few years later, every two. In 1988, the seminaries of Cần Thơ and Vĩnh were opened. In 1992 it was the turn of Nha Trang to open; in 1994 the Seminary of Huế opened, and finally in 2006 the Seminary of Xuân Lộc was opened. Since the year of 2007-2008, the bishops have reclaimed their authority and open new classes every year with the number of students depending on the capacity of each seminary.

¹⁹ *Kỷ Yếu Giáo Hoàng Học Viện Thánh Piô X Dalat – 50 Năm Nhìn Lại (1958-2008)* pp.18-23
 <<http://www.ghhv.quetroi.net/01KYGHHV/kyyeuGHHV.pdf>> (accessed September 2004).

3. A Brief Presentation of the Process of Priestly Formation in the Saigon Archdiocese

The mission of a Roman Catholic seminary is the formation of men for the diocesan priesthood. To form true disciples of Christ in sacerdotal ministry, especially in the present circumstances of Vietnam, the Saint Joseph Seminary seeks to comply faithfully with “The Priestly Formation: Orientation and Direction” of The Episcopal Conference of Vietnam in order to establish a foundation in the seminarians for a lifetime of priestly ministry within the Church. Through the interrelated components of the four dimensions of formation - human, spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral - the seminary strives to train men, called as priests to be living images of Jesus Christ, to become more like Christ the Good Shepherd.

Before entering Saint Joseph Seminary, the candidates must attend college and complete studies for their bachelor’s degree. At the same time, they also begin the formation process in their own dioceses. In the Saigon Archdiocese, the training program is divided into two phases: three years of Novitiate and one year of pre-seminary. During the first three years, under the guidance of a spiritual director, the candidates are led through three steps:

(i) The candidates are taught how to look at daily activities through the eyes of faith, how to sanctify them, and how to practice the “daily examination of conscience” in order to grow in faith. This step lasts about one year.

(ii) The candidates are trained to discover and practice the virtues they will need to acquire, especially those necessary for the future priestly life. This step lasts one or two years.

(iii) In this step, the candidates are taught how to organize a personal monthly day of recollection. The goal of this step is to help candidates to know how to live the spirit of Christ in their lives. This step lasts one or two years. One of the main tools of this phase is writing a spiritual journal. Feelings, descriptions, reflections on the past, images and thoughts are what should be included in this journal. In addition, they include lists of events that have had a major impact on their lives. In a monthly meeting, the spiritual director reads the candidate's journal and helps him to develop his spiritual life.

The second phase is the time to prepare to actually enter the seminary. In this phase, every month, on the recollection day, the candidates are invited into the seminary to take part in all its activities in order to get accustomed to seminary life. They are helped with the transition plans, so that when they enter the seminary their absence does not cause difficulties for their family or their parish where they have been involved or the company where they worked. This phase lasts one or two years.

In October, 2007, following the guides "*Il Periodo Propedeutico*" of the Congregation for the Catholic Education of the Seminaries and the Institutes of Studies, a one year pre-seminary replaced this second phase. The candidates live together at the Saigon Archdiocesan Pastoral Institute. After this one year pre-seminary, the candidates are presented by the vocation director and the formation staff to their bishop in order to be allowed to enter Seminary.

4. The importance of the pre-seminary program

Families within which children are raised are seedbeds for the future of vocations in the Church, especially the vocation to the priesthood. As Pope Pius XI claimed: "the first and most natural place where the flowers of the [vocations] should almost

spontaneously grow and bloom, remains always the truly and deeply Christian family.”²⁰

With the same point of view as Pius XI, Pope John Paul II developed this theme in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: “The holiness of marital love, the harmony of family life, the spirit of faith with which the problems of daily life are confronted, openness toward others, especially towards the poorest, and participation in the life of the Christian community form the proper environment for their children to listen to the divine call and make a generous response.”²¹ The Congregation for Clergy agreed that: “it is almost impossible to have a blossoming of vocations without Christian families which are domestic churches”.²²

Truly, the idea of becoming a priest begins to germinate in the boy’s mind in the Catholic family. However, this seed of his priestly vocation needs to grow and to bloom. The Church community collaborates in this growth; in particular the minor seminary had played a very important part, as the Second Vatican Council stated: “In minor seminaries erected to develop the seeds of vocations, the students should be prepared by special religious formation, particularly through appropriate spiritual direction, (...) the fatherly direction of the superiors, and with the proper cooperation of the parents (OT 3).”²³

However for various reasons, in Vietnam as well as in the broader world, minor seminaries were closed. As a result, the preparation and the quality of candidates

²⁰ Pius XI, Encyclical *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, 20 December 1935, n 80.

<http://www.newadvent.org/library/docs_pi11ac.htm> (10 March 2010).

²¹ John Paul II, *Message for the XXXIX World Day of Prayer for Vocations*, April 21, 2002, n. 3, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/vocations/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_20011123_XXXIX-voc-2002_en.html (9 March 2010).

²² Congregation for the Clergy, *The Priest, Pastor, and Leader of the Parish Community* (2002) n. 27, <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cclergy/documents/rc_con_cclergy_doc_20020804_i-struzione-presbitero_en.html> (10 March 2010).

²³ Second Vatican Council, *Optatam Totius*, 1965, *Norms for Priestly Formation*, Vol. I, ed. National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington DC: USCC, Inc., 1994), 4.

entering seminary became difficult issues. From the bishops' reports and the formators' experiences, there was lacking the mature personality, intelligence, and knowledge, as well as the spiritual development of the candidates.²⁴ At the synod on the theme "The Formation of Priests in Circumstances of the Present Day" held in Rome in the Autumn of 1990, bishops from around the world emphasized the need for a pre-seminary preparation. Following the Synod of Bishops, Pope John Paul II stressed this issue again in his the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation entitled *Pastores Dabo Vobis* of 25 March 1992: "The purpose and specific educational form of the major seminary demand that candidates for the priesthood have a certain prior preparation before entering it. (...) [T]ogether with the synod fathers I ask that there be a sufficient period of preparation prior to seminary formation (PDV 62)."²⁵ In the circumstances of Vietnam as well as in other countries without minor seminaries, the Holy Father has issued guidelines for dealing with this lack:

In those cases where it is not possible to run minor seminaries (which "in many regions seem necessary and very useful"), other "institutions" need to be provided, as for example vocational groups for adolescents and young people. (...) [S]uch groups can offer a systematic guide, in a community context, with which to check the existence and development of vocations. While such young people live at home and take part in the activities of the Christian community which helps them along the path of formation, they should not be left alone. They need a particular group or community to refer to and where they can find support to follow through the specific vocational journey which the gift of the Holy Spirit has initiated in them (PDV 64).²⁶

²⁴ The Congregation for the Catholic Education of the Seminaries and the Institutes of Studies, *Il Periodo Propedeutico*, Vatican Library, 10 May 1998, <
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_19981005_semin_proped_it.html> (15 April 2010)

²⁵ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1992, *Norms for Priestly Formation*, Vol. II, ed. National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington DC: USCC, Inc., 1994), 324-25.

²⁶ Ibid.

Today, the minor seminary, which enrolled high school students, is no longer common nor familiar; therefore the term “pre-seminary” is used. Pre-seminary includes young men beyond high school age who are in the process of training, with emphasis on preparing the candidates for a major seminary. Institutions of pre-seminary training serve the same purpose as the minor seminaries had, i.e., “to help boys who seem to show the initial signs of vocation to recognize this vocation more easily and clearly, and to respond to it.”²⁷ In the situation of Vietnam, the pre-seminary has two goals: helping the candidates discern and develop the appropriate motivations for a priestly vocation, and practice suitable abilities and virtues needed for priestly life.²⁸

5. The importance of prayer and community life in the process of priestly formation

The pastoral theologian Paul Bernier writes: “Christian priesthood cannot be understood unless we understand the priesthood of Jesus.”²⁹ In addition, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* of the Vatican Council II has declared that:

Because it is joined with the episcopal order the office of priests shares in the authority by which Christ himself builds up and sanctifies and rules his Body. Hence the priesthood of priests, while presupposing the sacraments of initiation, is nevertheless conferred by its own particular sacrament. Through that sacrament priests by the anointing of the Holy Spirit are signed with a special character and so are configured to Christ the priest in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ the head.³⁰

²⁷ Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, Basic Norms for Priestly Formation, 1985, *Norms for Priestly Formation*, Vol. I, ed. National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington DC: USCC, Inc., 1994), 25.

²⁸ General Secretariate of the Episcopal Conference of Vietnam, *Dao Tao Linh Muc: Dinh Huong Va Chi Dan* (Ha Noi: Nha xuất bản Tôn Giáo, 2010), 134.

²⁹ Paul Bernier, *Ministry in the Church* (Mystic: Twenty-Third Publications, 1992), 44.

³⁰ Second Vatican Council. “Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests,” 1965. In *Norms for Priestly Formation*, Vol. I, ed. National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington DC: USCC, Inc., 1994), #2, 266.

Therefore, Jesus is the starting point and the example to the priesthood of prayer and community life.

Prayer is the way to help the faithful live “in a vital and personal relationship with the living and true God (CCC 2558),” therefore, “it is therefore necessary to educate boys and young men so that they will become faithful to prayer and meditation on God's word: in silence and listening, they will be able to perceive the Lord who is calling them to the priesthood, and be able to follow that call promptly and generously.”³¹ The priest is above all a man of prayer. In fact, prayer is the basis of all ministries. As pastoral caregivers, priests need to create the space and time where God can become their master and where they can respond freely to God's guidance.

In the public life of Jesus, although He was very busy in His ministry, He was faithful to take time to converse with His Father in a place of solitude (Mk 1:35, 6:46; Mt 14:22-23a; Lk 6: 12). In the first days of His active ministry, Jesus would withdraw to deserted places to pray (Lk 5:15-16), when He chose the twelve apostles, Jesus spent the previous night on the mount in prayer (Lk 6:12), and before Peter's confession of faith and His first prediction of the Passion, Jesus prayed in solitude (Lk 9:18). At the Transfiguration, which occurred in the middle of the public ministry, Jesus took Peter, John and James and went up to the mountain for prayer, in which His glory was revealed as at once that of the beloved Son and of the prophet to whom all must listen (Lk 9:29). His entire mission in life was to do the will of God (Jn 5:19). Despite his busy ministry, Jesus often conversed with His Father. Reading the gospel, one can say that Jesus was a

³¹ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1992, *Norms for Priestly Formation*, Vol. II, ed. National Conference of Catholic Bishops (Washington DC: USCC, Inc., 1994), #38, 301.

person of prayer, and he became a model, a “divine paradigm” that ministers can imitate.³²

Looking at Jesus’ prayer-filled life, all priests need to be like Jesus and to strive for the intimate relationship with God that He had. Prayer is of prime importance, and solitude is often the place of prayer. As Jesus said, “Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken from her,” because she sat at the Lord’s feet, listening to His words lovingly (Lk 10:42). People seek friends to comfort them and ease their loneliness. Jesus is that intimate, ultimate friend. If the priest is a person of prayer, he will not go alone when he works for God. The spirit of prayer is similar to a furnace burning in his apostolic soul. If he wishes to feed that fire, he must stir up the larger logs of sacrifice and recollection as well as the kindling of frequent brief prayers and secret acts of self-denial.

A prayer-filled life connects the priest with his world. In this world, the priest represents the living image of Christ to parishioners who journey through a world filled with many and varied attractions, experiences, demands, and influences. A prayer-filled life helps him to become more patient and more attentive to the suffering and pain of those around him and more responsive to injustices in society. These connections keep him rooted in Jesus’ teaching about loving one another (cf. Jn 13:34-35), and help him avoid becoming selfish, indifferent, or isolated. How has the priest benefited from spending time in solitude? Peace and spiritual joy begin with taking time for contemplation each day. There are many problems the priest meets that come from

³² J.B. Smith. *A spiritual formation workbook: Small-group Resources for Nurturing Christian Growth*, (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), 33.

within himself and from ministerial activities. Taking time with God, the priest receives His blessing with wisdom and courage and inner healing, finds out about himself, recovers himself after lost and tired times, and balances his relationships with others.

One of the main goals of the seminary formation program is to help candidates for the priesthood develop the spiritual dimension of their lives. The seminary is actually a community that is “re-living the experience of formation which our Lord provided for the Twelve (PDV 60).” Living in the seminary is the time to be more consciously living with God. Therefore, prayer life is focused on helping the seminarians develop their relationship with God in a vital and personal way. In Pope Benedict's apostolic exhortation on the word of God and the Church, *Verbum Domini*, he points out that there is a specific relationship between the word of God, priestly vocation and its discernment:

Those aspiring to the ministerial priesthood are called to a profound personal relationship with God's word, particularly in *lectio divina*, so that this relationship will in turn nurture their vocation: it is in the light and strength of God's word that one's specific vocation can be discerned and appreciated, loved and followed, and one's proper mission carried out, by nourishing the heart with thoughts of God, so that faith, as our response to the word, may become a new criterion for judging and evaluating persons and things, events and issues.

Such attention to the prayerful reading of Scripture must not in any way lead to a dichotomy with regard to the exegetical studies which are a part of formation. The Synod recommended that seminarians be concretely helped to see *the relationship between biblical studies and scriptural prayer* (VD 82).³³

After communion with God, by which the priest will be with God in prayer, he discovers the call to community. Bernier writes: “If ministry has any purpose at all, it is directed to nurturing the life and activity of the community – the church – as a whole.”³⁴

³³ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini* (New York: Paulist Press, 2011), 119-20.

³⁴ Paul Bernier, *Ministry in the Church*, 16.

God creates people to share their hearts and souls with the other, and with God Himself, so they each have a deep need for communion built right into them. In chapter 18, Matthew describes how Jesus' pastoral concern is to be expressed in the Christian community. He stresses the need for humility rather than a concern about prominence in rank (vss. 1–4, cf. 20:20–28, 23:1–12). He also stresses the responsibility toward members of the community (vss. 5–9), particularly toward individuals who may be held in low esteem (vss. 10–14).³⁵ Jesus teaches that the yield of authentic worship is to bear witness in the worshipping community to God's salvation-creating love.

Jesus not only teaches by word but by deed. When He began to establish His earthly ministry, He was surrounded by many disciples. From among these disciples, "He appointed twelve ... that they might be with Him" (Mk 3:14) as a smaller group. Jesus' messianic mission was called forth a community of disciples who believed in His teaching as God's word and who followed the pattern of His life as God's will. When Jesus asked His initial disciples to follow Him, He was asking for companionship, which involved walking alongside Him and learning from Him. The charismatic expressions of community in earliest Christianity stem from the radical nature of Jesus' own lifestyle. The Acts of the Apostles describes the common life shared by the early Christians of Jerusalem that became the inspirational model for the community life:

"All these devoted themselves with one accord to prayer..." (1:14)
 "Every day they devoted themselves to meeting together in the temple area and to breaking bread in their homes. They ate their meals with exultation and sincerity of heart, praising God and enjoying favor with all the people." (2:46, 47)

³⁵ A.J. Malherbe, "Traditions and theology of care in New Testament," in *Dictionary of pastoral care and counseling*, edited by R. J. Hunter (pp.787-792). Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990, 789.

“...they raised their voices to God with one accord” (4:24).
 “The community of believers was of one heart and mind” (4:32).

As a beautiful flower garden attracts butterflies and bees, the early Christian community most clearly lived out the gospel of charity in the relationship of its members; it became the most powerful force for attracting other people. It is evidently clear that when united together in prayer, their hearts were filled with joy, for in praying they were at peace with God and one another. The fruit of their prayer was that they loved God and one another, and this led to great happiness. These results show that prayer life is a companion to community life. Each complements the other as they mutually develop.

The historical sources showed the explosive spread of Christian churches into very different cultural and linguistic contexts. As a result, Christianity quickly became a very diverse movement. Until the second century, there was slow progress to establish a greater unity among the very diverse churches. For example, in his letter to the Romans, St. Paul showed that the Christian community experienced diversity because the members were both Jews and converted Gentiles, people from around the Empire, of different political persuasions, who came from upper and lower classes, etc. Saint Paul dealt with conflicts over religious matters in this community. He expressed this concern by his prayer, “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to think in harmony with one another, in keeping with Christ Jesus” (Rm 15:5). Saint Paul has named the Scriptures as a resource for the harmony they are to have: “For whatever was written previously was written for our instruction, that by endurance and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope” (Rm 15:4). Saint Paul taught the Christians in Rome that they must live following the example of Christ. As they, Jews and Gentiles,

had been accepted and welcomed by Christ, now they were to welcome one another into their communities, despite their differences in society. In other words, the Scripture is the resource for the harmony in community life, as well as the focal point to unite the different members. Therefore, prayer life, especially prayer with the Scriptures, can strengthen each member in the community in endurance and encouragement.

The early Christians had a strong conviction that the community comes first – that each individual view his own goals, desires, and relational needs as secondary to the providence of God who is caring for His children through the local church. Even Josephus, a second-century pagan historian, shared his perspective on activities at the Jerusalem Temple as follows: “At these sacrifices, prayers for the welfare of the community must take precedence over those for ourselves; for we are born for fellowship, and he who sets its claims above his private interests is specially acceptable to God” (Against Apion, 2.195-96; Loeb).

In his commentary on Jesus’ prayer, Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (A.D. 250) taught his disciples:

Before all things, the Teacher of peace and Master of unity did not wish prayer to be offered individually and privately as one would pray only for himself when he prays. We do not say: “My Father, who art in heaven,” nor “Give me this day my bread,” nor does each one ask that only his debt be forgiven him and that he be led not into temptation and that he be delivered from evil for himself alone. Our prayer is public and common, and when we pray, we pray not for one but for the whole people, because we, the whole people, are one.³⁶

“We, the whole people, are one” – the priority of community needs in prayers of petition as well as in daily life. Cyprian’s understanding could not be better expressed.

³⁶ Saint Cyprian, *Treatises*. The Fathers of The Church Series (Washington DC: The Catholic University of America Press, Inc., 2007), 132.

Inspired by the example of community life of Jesus Christ and of the early Christian communities, priests who are called by Jesus Christ and are sent as co-workers in the same apostolate, “by the sacrament of Order, are bound together by an intimate sacramental brotherhood (PO. 8)”. “Each is joined to the rest of the members of this priestly body by special ties of apostolic charity of ministry and of brotherhood.” This fraternal bond is made “by the bond of charity, prayer and total cooperation” (PO. 8).³⁷

In pastoral ministry, priests need to be aware that ministry is collaborative. Collaboration is the essential basis for continuing the compassionate response of Christ for the wounds of suffering humanity. “Only together in community can Christians hope to embody the compassion of Jesus for the world.”³⁸ The priest is not a “lone ranger” in offering pastoral care. If he is alone, he may feel overwhelmed and helpless, even discouraged and depressed. There are often others in the community whose caring and nurturing skills may well be far superior to the clergy’s own. The task of the pastor in the parish is to tap these resources for the good of the whole body of Christ. Living in the seminary offers a community life experience before the candidate for the priesthood is assigned his ministry. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* states: “the major seminary should strive to become ‘a community built on deep friendship and charity so that it can be considered a true family living in joy (PDV 60).’”

In the process of priestly formation in the seminary: the community life has the goal of preparing the candidates so that they may be united with the wider community of

³⁷ Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, 1965, *Norms for Priestly Formation*, Vol. I, ed., 272.

³⁸ Wilkie Au, “A spirituality for collaborative ministry,” in *Handbook of spirituality for ministers*, ed. R. J. Wicks (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1995), 398.

the diocesan *presbyterium*, and the prayer life functions as a tool to consolidate this fraternal bond. Living in the seminary is an important time to build up a sense of community and to develop the skills of community life. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* proposes that the seminary is an educational community which has three characteristics. In the apostolic aspect, the seminary is actually a community established by the bishop to offer seminarians an opportunity to experience a formation process similar to what Jesus provided for the twelve apostles. In the human aspect, seminary life attempts to nourish deep friendships and love that so that they really consider themselves a true family. In the ecclesial aspect, the seminarians form a “community of disciples” as they celebrate liturgy, pray together, share Eucharist, and practice love and caring for one another. As the love of the community and each of its members progress, Christ's Spirit shines forth and reflects God's love for the Church. Therefore, the formators have a duty to help the candidates living during the time in seminary “that the seminary should be experienced not as something external and superficial, or simply a place in which to live and study, but in an interior and profound way. It should be experienced as a community, a specifically ecclesial community, a community that relives the experience of the group of Twelve who were united to Jesus (PVD 60).”

When seminarians commit themselves to growth in priestly vocation, they are aware that the Holy Spirit is the main agent of progress in this formation. They desire practical support and accountability to others who share the same commitment and mission to Christ. They want to be known by others as they really are; that is, as they are known by God, being grateful for their real strengths and complementing each other as

they deal with their weaknesses. They look for a close group that they can talk with about things that really confuse them, as well as about things that really delight them. Thus a small group is an ideal setting in a pre-seminary program for the practice of *lectio divina*, a means of building up true community life through prayer life. As the pre-seminarians pray together, they open up to each other and show the unity which Christ desires for them, namely “in this way is shown forth that unity with which Christ willed his own to be perfected in one, that the world might know that the Son had been sent by the Father (PO 8).”³⁹

In conclusion, the pastoral path of the diocesan priest's spirituality is grounded in the call to holiness through the life of prayer and community. Like all their brothers and sisters, priests are chosen by God as beloved before they were born. They are blessed, through Christ, to be sons of God. They are wounded and humbled in their relationships, works, and spiritual lives. They find their own healing in the life of prayer and community where they are given by God to others, given to share their lives with others, given to bless others as they have been blessed. Pope Benedict XVI stated that: “Generous self-giving for others is impossible without discipline and constant recovery of true faith-filled interiority. The effectiveness of pastoral action depends, ultimately, upon prayer; otherwise, service becomes empty activism.”⁴⁰ Therefore, in the process of training a man to be a priest, the formators need to establish an environment of prayer and community life in the seminary. In particular, during the one-year pre-seminary program, *lectio divina*, especially in groups, can prepare the candidates for both a deeper

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Benedict XVI, *Pope's Prepared Text for Clergy of Freising*, Zenit Online, September 14, 2006, <<http://www.zenit.org/article-16976?l=english>> (September 7, 2010).

prayer life and a richer community life, so to improve the candidates' competence to respond to God's transforming grace.

CHAPTER II

LECTIO DIVINA: BRING THE “WORD” TO THE “WORLD”

“In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe.” (Heb 1: 1-2)

God has first spoken to human beings, and He waits for each person to respond in the language of prayer. When the “fullness of time” comes (cf. Gal 4:4), “in Jesus Christ God not only speaks to man but also seeks him out. The Incarnation of the Son of God attests that God goes in search of man.”⁴¹ In its magnificent prologue, the Gospel of John proclaims Jesus as the preexistent and incarnate Word of God who has revealed the Father to human beings: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. (...) And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth” (Jn 1:1-2, 14). Reflecting on this prologue of John's gospel, Origen (third century) recognized two ways in which “the Word became flesh”: in the Incarnation, the Word “became Jesus”; and in Scripture, the Word “became book”.⁴² Therefore, the dual mode of presence of the Word, Jesus and Scripture, is the source of prayer, the liturgy of the Church, and the virtues of faith, hope, and charity (CCC 2662).

⁴¹ John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, November 10, 1994, n. 7, <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_10111994_tertio-millennio-adveniente_en.html>, (September 6, 2010).

⁴² Mario Masini, *Lectio Divina: An Ancient Prayer That Is Ever New* (New York: St. Pauls, 2007), 7.

In explanations of reading the Scriptures “from within” in terms of hermeneutic principle, John Breck, a Biblical specialist, stated, “to interpret the Word of God accurately, to perceive the depths of its message and its power to transform human life, one must ‘live’ the Word.”⁴³ This means: first, to live in Him who is the Word, Jesus Christ; second, to live the Word of Scripture by hearing the Word and opening oneself to it on the level of the heart as well as the mind; and finally to an actual praying of the Word.⁴⁴ Origen, the Master Reader of the third century, wrote: “Everything in the Scriptures has meaning for Christian believers because of their life in Christ. Christ is the source, the content, and the meaning of the Scriptures.”⁴⁵ St. Jerome (fourth century), whose life was centered on the Bible, had a very popular proclamation: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”. For Augustine, “reading the Scriptures is an encounter with Christ and in that is found its transformative power.”⁴⁶

In fact, people acknowledge that “we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Rm 8:26). As proclaimed by the evangelists in the Gospels, the disciples were humble enough to ask Jesus, the Word become flesh and dwelling among us, who fully revealed to the faithful how to pray (cf. Lk 11:1-4). The faithful are called “first to contemplate Him in prayer, then to hear how He teaches us to pray, in order to know how He hears our prayer (CCC 2598)”, so that they may do God’s will in faith, through an ongoing conversion of the heart. In short, the humble response of human’s hearts and minds to God in the name of Jesus and in the Spirit is Christian prayer. Whether the faithful are

⁴³ John Breck, *Scripture In Tradition* (New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 67.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2009), 35.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 90.

aware of it or not, prayer is “the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him (CCC 2560).”

In the experiences of the monks and nuns in the Middle Ages, the lifestyle of monasticism and the practice of *lectio divina* helped them encounter the Word of God. It was also an opportunity for intimacy with Christ.⁴⁷ Pope Benedict XVI stated about the importance of *lectio divina* in his apostolic exhortation of the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God: “The documents produced before and during the Synod mentioned a number of methods for a faith-filled and fruitful approach to sacred Scripture. Yet the greatest attention was paid to *lectio divina*, which is truly ‘capable of opening up to the faithful the treasures of God's word, but also of bringing about an encounter with Christ, the living word of God (VD 87).’”⁴⁸ Hence, this project of using *lectio divina* in a pre-seminary in Vietnam was proposed to help the participants there to bring the Word of God to the world in which they live and to facilitate the development of community among them. The pre-seminary selected was for candidates for the St. Joseph Seminary of the Saigon Archdiocese.

1. The expressions of the life of prayer in the Church’s tradition

Prayer and Christian life are inseparable because their foundation is the same love, the love with which Jesus has loved human people (cf. CCC 2745). According to St. Augustine, prayer serves as the expression of one’s desire and affirms that God responds by moving the heart of the one praying toward Him. As humans, people must purify their desires and their hopes, to open themselves and to welcome the sweetness of

⁴⁷ Christian Raab, “Prayer as a Journey: Medieval Spiritual Paths” in *The Tradition of Catholic Prayer* eds. by Christian Raab and Harry Hagan (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 77.

⁴⁸ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 128.

God.⁴⁹ The history of Christian prayer during the last two thousand years shows an abundance of different approaches in those who have lived a life of prayer. There are various forms of prayer such as public prayer, the official liturgy of the Church, the Breviary, spontaneous prayer, and private prayer. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church the three major expressions of prayer are vocal prayer, meditative prayer, and contemplative prayer (CCC 2721). These three expressions of prayer all come from the heart, which is viewed as the seat of prayer (CCC 2562-63).

Vocal prayer is an essential form of prayer in the Christian life that uses words or equivalent symbols of expression to converse with God. Based on the foundation of the union of body and soul in human nature, people have the need to transfer the interior devotion of the heart into the external expression of prayer. It involves the use of not just recitation of some set formulas, but also automatically gushes out of the soul with spontaneous prayer. Because this is “the external expression that associates the body with interior prayer” (CCC 2703), the important element of this vocal prayer is praying with the worshippers’ whole being and from the depths of their souls. Memorizing a number of prayers that are quoted from the Psalms, the Gospels’ passages, and daily common prayers such as the Our Father, Hail Mary, etc. is very helpful, so that at the right moment people can find the right and meaningful vocal prayer. Prayer and daily life are united into the fabric of Christian life and are woven together into a single cloth. Prayer makes sense only if it is lived. Vocal prayer is not just pronouncing words, but trying to live out what one has just said.

⁴⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience* (February 27, 2008).
 <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20080227_en.html> (September 13, 2010).

Meditation is a quest which engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire, to consider the mysteries of Christ more deeply, and especially to confront these mysteries in the life of the prayer, that the faithful may see what the Lord asks of them (CCC 2723). In this process one becomes more conscious of the facts just read, and more and more deeply meditates. Reflecting on Jesus' behavior and His words, meditation is reasoning to come to know Him better. As a result, the mind moves the heart to respond to the Lord Jesus' love by a commitment into action of following Him. There are many and varied methods of meditation, however, "a method is only a guide; the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus (CCC 2707)."

Contemplative prayer, as St. Teresa described it, is a "close sharing between friends" – the person who is praying and Jesus, and in Him, the Father (CCC 2709). Under the prompting of the Holy Spirit, the faithful are called to surrender, in humility and poverty, to the loving will of the Father. They offer their hearts and their whole beings up to the Lord who loves them, as an offering to be purified and transformed (CCC 2711), preparing for its goal of a deeper union with Jesus. In this process of contemplative prayer, the faithful take "a gaze of faith fixed upon Jesus, an attentiveness to the Word of God, a silent love" (CCC 2724) to discover what God reveals of Himself in the person of Jesus. As a result, the more they love Jesus, the more they learn by analogy how He is speaking in the events of their own life. By hearing the Word of God, they respond by an attentiveness to the obedience of faith. This prompts a greater readiness to follow Him in their daily lives and events today. This is not accomplished

by human effort alone, but it is a gift and a grace from God given to those who readily accept it in humility and with an open heart.

Normally, a person uses more or less these three expressions of prayer, as enumerated above, according to one's temperament or personality and one's style of prayer and spirituality. Moreover, to pray effectively, each person must find the prayer pattern that is most suited to each individual character. Researching the fact that different individuals have different ways of traveling on the spiritual journey, giving many workshops, seminars, retreats, and providing spiritual direction for numerous persons, in their work *Prayer And Temperament: Different Prayer Forms For Different Personality Types*, Chester Michael and Marie Norrisey offered a theory of the relationship between one's temperament or personality and the kind of prayer or spirituality that is practiced by different persons.

Based on the approach to psychological types developed by the psychiatrist Carl G. Jung, and systematized in Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), Chester Michael and Marie Norrisey stated: *Lectio Divina* is a type of prayer that "is appropriate for all four of the basic temperaments and all sixteen individual types of human personality."⁵⁰ Thus, it is reasonable to say that: "it (*lectio divina*) is both one of the oldest and most popular of all forms of prayer in the Christian tradition."⁵¹ The authors explained how the four steps of *lectio divina* make use of all four basic psychological functions of Sensing, Thinking, Feeling, and Intuition. *Lectio* (reading) uses the senses in reading or perceiving the Scriptures. *Meditatio* (meditation) uses thinking to reflect upon the insights presented in

⁵⁰ Chester Michael and Marie Norrisey, *Prayer and Temperament: Different Prayer Forms for Different Personality Types* (Charlottesville: The Open Door, Inc., 1984), 31.

⁵¹ Ibid.

one's reading. *Oratio* (prayer) uses feeling to personalize the new insights for communion with God. *Contemplatio* (contemplation) uses intuition to coalesce the experience of the reading, meditation, and prayer into new insights under the inspirations of the Holy Spirit.⁵² In the perspective of expression of prayer, *lectio divina* uses all three of the expressions of prayer – vocal prayer, meditative prayer, and contemplative prayer. In addition, used properly, it has an innate linkage to one's present circumstances, both in the world and the spiritual journey. For all these reasons, the sections below will focus on this form of prayer *lectio divina*.

2. Historical roots of *Lectio Divina*

Christianity was born in a world that already had its own religions and cultures, in which its most direct influence was the Jewish tradition. Throughout the first three centuries, on the one hand, the early Christian communities maintained prayer practices that borrowed from the habits of their Jewish ancestors, such as reading the Hebrew Scriptures (but from the perspective of Jesus Christ) in the communal gatherings. On the other hand, they also developed the practice of private personal prayer, such as spontaneous prayer several times a day, or reading,⁵³ or meditating on the Hebrew Scriptures and on Christian religious reading.⁵⁴

Origen (185 – 234), the acknowledged master of the school of Alexandria, was the first to make clear reference to the existence of a Christian approach to spiritual reading by using the Greek term “*theia anagnôsis*” (theia = divine, anagnôsis = reading).

⁵² Ibid. 32.

⁵³ Matthias Neuman, “Private Prayer in the Early Christian Centuries,” in *The Tradition of Catholic Prayer*, eds. by Christian Raab and Harry Hagan (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2007), 49.

⁵⁴ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 26-27.

It means spiritual reading is reading sacred texts.⁵⁵ This is the original term for *lectio divina*. Pope Benedict XVI credited Origen with providing the “primordial role” in the history of *lectio divina*.⁵⁶ Origen dedicated himself to studying the holy Scriptures. He not only memorized passages, but he also looked for a deeper meaning that underlay the Scriptural texts. He placed the Scriptures as the central point for daily life with great enthusiasm. He encouraged his students to study the Scriptures and shared his zeal with them.⁵⁷ Origen also suggested the allegorical method to find out the threefold meaning in reading the Scriptures – literal, moral, and spiritual/allegorical. In fact, he usually emphasized only two meanings, the literal and the spiritual (or the “letter” and the “spirit”).⁵⁸ In his letter to Gregory Thaumaturgus, Origen recommended: “Study first of all the *lectio* of the divine Scriptures. Study them, I say. For we need to study the divine writings deeply.”⁵⁹ In speaking of Origen, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed that: “Notwithstanding all the theological richness of his thought, his is never a purely academic approach; it is always founded on the experience of prayer, of contact with God. Indeed, to his mind, knowledge of the Scriptures requires prayer and intimacy with Christ even more than study.”⁶⁰

Learning from Origen’s works to interpret the Scriptures, Bishop Ambrose of Milan translated the Greek term “*theia anagnôsis*” into Latin *lectio divina*. Pope Benedict XVI valued Ambrose’s works: “Ambrose transferred to the Latin environment

⁵⁵ John Breck, *Scripture In Tradition*, 72.

⁵⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience* (May 2, 2007). <
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20070502_en.html> (September 10, 2010).

⁵⁷ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 28-29.

⁵⁸ Roy B. Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Colorado Spring: David C. Cook, 1991), 36.

⁵⁹ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience* (May 2, 2007).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

the meditation on the Scriptures which Origen had begun, introducing in the West the practice of *lectio divina*. The method of *lectio* served to guide all of Ambrose's preaching and writings, which stemmed precisely from prayerful listening to the Word of God."⁶¹ With his great influence, St. Ambrose handed *lectio divina* on to Augustine and to the monastic tradition that followed.

Augustine's life was strongly influenced by the preaching of Ambrose and his encounter with Neoplatonic thought. As a result, he committed his life to reading the Scriptures as a way to spiritual growth.⁶² From his own conversion experience and his experience of reading the Scriptures, St. Augustine wrote *De Doctrina Christiana* – a collection of four books that is a compendium of exegetical theology to guide the reader in how to read and how to understand and interpret the Sacred Scriptures. "We must exhort those who apply themselves to the Sacred Letters not only to know how to recognize the different literary genres in the Scriptures, but also – and it is the main and most necessary thing – to pray for understanding (*praecipue et maxime orent ut intelligent*)" (III, 37, 56).⁶³

St. Augustine showed the way to approach Holy Scriptures. He taught that fear of God was the first key in this approaching, because "Fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge, wisdom and instruction, which only fools despise" (Prov. 1:7). Fear helps us to discover what God wants us to do and what God wants us to stay away from. The

⁶¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience* (October 24, 2007). <
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20071024_en.html> (September 10, 2010).

⁶² Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 80-81.

⁶³ Lorenzo Cappelletti, "The main and most necessary thing is to pray for understanding", *30 Days*, September 2008.

second step is that piety tempers fear, allowing us to become gentle and humble. After we have dealt with fear and piety, Augustine proposes a third step, which is knowledge. In this third step we learn to love God for His own sake and to love our neighbor as ourselves, for His sake. This brings us to step four which is fortitude, which drives us to work for True Justice with courage, without concern about the cost. The fifth step is the embrace of an attitude and practice of mercy. The sixth step is seeing more clearly that we need to put aside our connections with mere “things” in this world, and focus on our love of God and desire to “Taste and see how good is the Lord” (Ps. 34:9). The seventh step is wisdom.⁶⁴ Augustine said that the supreme purpose of reading and interpreting the Sacred Scriptures is love.⁶⁵ In books 2 and 3 of *De Doctrina Christiana*, Augustine resumed the principles of commentary about textual criticism, literary criticism, and theological criticism. According to Augustine, “to read Scripture fruitfully [the readers] must use the acquisitions of all scholarly enquiry, including that into the physical world, the vegetable and animal world. And more generally use all the scholarly tools that the culture of his time allowed.”⁶⁶

Both Origen and Augustine had great influences in the life of desert ascetics, especially in their reading and meditation on the Scriptures and putting this into practice in their lives. One of those who was attracted to the ascetic life was John Cassian (360 – 435). Accepting Origen’s ideas about the threefold sense of Scripture, Cassian further separated the third of Origen’s senses, that is, “the spiritual” was divided into two: the

⁶⁴ Stephen N. Filippo, *The Scriptural Roots of St. Augustine's Spirituality*, <http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2007/sfilippo_augustine_apr07.asp> (September 14, 2010)

⁶⁵ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 88.

⁶⁶ Lorenzo Cappelletti, “The main and most necessary thing is to pray for understanding”, *30 Days*, September 2008.

allegorical and the anagogical. It is from the time of John Cassian that the theory of the fourfold sense of Scripture, literal (or historical), tropological (or moral), allegorical, and anagogical, was established to interpret the Scriptures in the West. He used the technical terms in a very exact way. For example, the Latin words: “*oratio* in the restrictive sense is a spontaneous outpouring of the individual in response to the biblical word,” and *meditatio* was indicated “the repeated reciting of memorized texts until they became part of one’s being.”⁶⁷

During the Middle Ages, monasticism with its aim of helping the monk or nun encounter God in a place of silence was very popular. In the sixth century, St. Benedict (480 – 547), with his rule, had a major influence on monastic life. The spirit of St. Benedict’s Rule is summed up in the motto “*Ora et labora*” (pray and work). According to this motto, there is a clear distinction between work and prayer. But Benedict’s concept of prayer reached far beyond the choir hours of prayer; it included all the time that was not claimed for work. “This is clearly indicated by Rule 48: in order that idleness may have no place in the house ‘the brothers should be occupied at definite times with manual labour and at definite times with meditated reading (*lectio divina*)’. In addition to the Office in choir, the same emphasis is laid on *lectio divina* as on work.”⁶⁸

In short, the members in monastery practiced various ways of praying in which the two most important were the private prayer of *lectio divina* and the public prayer of the liturgy.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 118.

⁶⁸ Joseph A. Jungmann, *Christian Prayer Through the Centuries*, 2nd ed. (New York: Paulist Press, 2007), 34.

⁶⁹ Christian Raab, “Prayer as a Journey: Medieval Spiritual Paths”, 77.

In the 11th century, the Cistercian reform brought the goal of a life of contemplation into conformity with the spirit of the Saint Benedict's Rule. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) and his followers desired to live an austere spirituality, returning to poverty and simplicity as well as to the spirituality of manual labor by restoring the balance among work, public prayer, and private meditation. Therefore, in the later vision of Benedictine Rule drawn up by the Cistercians, the Order's program is summarized in three points: *opus Dei* (or Office), *lectio divina* and *labor manuum*.⁷⁰

In the twelfth century, the historical period of the rise of scholasticism, two figures who had influences in the history of *lectio divina* are Hugh of St. Victor (d. 1141) and Guigo II (d. 1188). Hugh of St. Victor in his book *Didascalicon* made attempts to draw into practicing the art of reading the Scriptures by the faithful.⁷¹ He set up a five-step reading process to move toward God: reading (or study), meditation, prayer, performance, and contemplation.⁷² Guigo II outlined the comprehension of a spiritual exercise by sketching four stages, using the visual image of a ladder with four rungs in his book *The Ladder of Monks (Scala claustralium)*.⁷³ He formalized what was widespread in the patristic and medieval periods of the Church – *Lectio Divina*. His four-step format for reading and praying the Scriptures is a cycle that one can go through over and over again. It includes: reading (*lectio*), meditation (*meditatio*), prayer (*oratio*), and contemplation (*contemplatio*). He described the four-step reading process in this way: “reading searches for sweetness, meditation pinpoints it, prayer requests it, and

⁷⁰ Joseph A. Jungmann, *Christian Prayer Through the Centuries*, 34.

⁷¹ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 161.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 165.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 167.

contemplation savors it.”⁷⁴ Using the same image of Hugh’s describing meditation as the chewing and digesting of the sacred Word, Guigo wrote: “Reading, as it were, puts food whole into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation is the sweetness which gladdens and refreshes. Reading works on the outside, meditation on the pith: prayer asks for what we long for, contemplation gives us delight in the sweetness which we have found.”⁷⁵ However, both Hugh and Guigo II faced the threat and the challenge from the rise and ardent adherence to the principles and methods of Scholasticism. As a result, although the practice of *lectio divina* remained alive, its importance was eclipsed.⁷⁶ One can say that from the birth of Scholasticism until the twentieth century, *lectio divina* resembled a tree in winter. During that time, the tree continued to live without leaves and flowers, under terrible weather. With spring, the tree seems to awaken and to bring forth new life.

After this long time of eclipse, *lectio divina* was revived by Vatican II. In fact, within the Roman Catholic Church about 1960, Jean Leclercq, a Benedictine monk, and author of a classic study on *lectio divina*, through his speaking and writing, raised appreciation of this ancient practice of *lectio* to a new level and promoted its practice among many Christians seeking to improve their prayer life.⁷⁷ In issuing the Second Vatican Council’s *Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), the bishops were aware of the significance of the Scriptures in Christian life: “All the clergy must hold fast to the Sacred Scriptures through diligent sacred reading and careful study, especially the priests

⁷⁴ Ibid., 170.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 217.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 192.

of Christ and others, such as deacons and catechists who are legitimately active in the ministry of the word. (...) The sacred synod also earnestly and especially urges all the Christian faithful, especially Religious, to learn by frequent reading of the divine Scriptures the ‘excellent knowledge of Jesus Christ’ (Phil. 3:8).”⁷⁸ This Vatican Council inspired the faithful to have a keen awareness of the central place of Scriptures, and a firm desire to come back to practice the ancient way of prayer, *lectio divina*, in their lives.

The revival of *lectio divina* was also supported by an important official document promoting Catholic Bible study in 1993 – *Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*. In this document, the Pontifical Biblical Commission made clear the principles of Catholic biblical interpretation. It also promoted biblical exegesis sensitive to the varieties of cultures in which the Scriptures are read, and described the importance of all the ways in which the Catholic Church uses the Scriptures, such as in the liturgy, *lectio divina*, pastoral ministry, and ecumenism. Regarding what it called the “ancient prayer”, this document stated: “‘*Lectio divina*’ is a reading, on an individual or communal level, of a more or less lengthy passage of Scripture, received as the word of God and leading, at the prompting of the Spirit, to meditation, prayer and contemplation.”⁷⁹

In his 1999 apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in America*, Pope John Paul II expressed the significance of practicing of the *lectio divina* in the Christian life, especially that of the priest:

⁷⁸ Second Vatican Council, *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II*, Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Boston: St. Paul Editions), 389.

⁷⁹ Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church* <<http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/pbcinter.htm>> (September 19, 2010).

“I am the Way, the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6). With these words, Jesus presents himself as the one path which leads to holiness. But a specific knowledge of this way comes chiefly through the word of God which the Church proclaims in her preaching. Therefore, the Church in America “must give a clear priority to prayerful reflection on Sacred Scripture by all the faithful”.⁽⁹⁰⁾ This reading of the Bible, accompanied by prayer, is known in the tradition of the Church as *lectio divina*, and it is a practice to be encouraged among all Christians. For priests, the *lectio divina* must be a basic feature of the preparation of their homilies, especially the Sunday homily. (#31)⁸⁰

Following his Venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI continued to address the need to retrieve the ancient practice of *lectio divina* in his pontificate. Speaking to the participants in the International Congress Organized to Commemorate the 40th Anniversary of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation "*Dei Verbum*" on September 16, 2005, he wrote concerning the need to retrieve the ancient practice of *lectio divina*:

I would like in particular to recall and recommend 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 (cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 25). If it is effectively promoted, this practice will bring to the Church - I am convinced of it - a new spiritual springtime. As a strong point of biblical ministry, *Lectio divina* should therefore be increasingly encouraged, also through the use of new methods, carefully thought through and in step with the times.⁸¹

In his reflection on the Opening of the Eleventh Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, he strongly advised the world's bishops: “We must practice ‘*Lectio divina*’, we must grasp Christ's way of thinking in the Scriptures, we must learn to think

⁸⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortations* (January 22, 1999)
<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america_en.html> (September 20, 2010).

⁸¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Speeches* (September 16, 2005)
<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050916_40-dei-verbum_en.html> (September 18, 2010).

with Christ, to think Christ's thoughts and thus feel Christ's sentiments, to be able to convey Christ's thinking to others.”⁸² In his first message to the youth of the world on the occasion of the 21st World Youth Day (April 9, 2006), Pope Benedict encouraged them to practice *lectio divina*: “My dear young friends, I urge you to become familiar with the Bible, and to have it at hand so that it can be your compass pointing out the road to follow. By reading it, you will learn to know Christ. Note what Saint Jerome said in this regard: ‘Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ’ (PL 24,17; cf Dei Verbum, 25). A time-honoured way to study and savour the word of God is *lectio divina* which constitutes a real and veritable spiritual journey marked out in stages.” And then, he even explained the four-step process of this prayer practice for them in this message.⁸³ In his recent apostolic exhortation on the word of God, *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI urges the people of God to practice *lectio divina* so that they might “be struck by the inexhaustible freshness of God's word which never grows old, ... listening and studying within the communion of the believers of every age: all these things represent a way of coming to unity in faith as a response to hearing the word of God (VD 46).”⁸⁴

Looking back on the historical roots of *lectio divina* shows that it has been present in the tradition of the Church from ancient times and continues to keep its great value in the prayer life of the faithful, clergy and laity alike, until today. From the beginning, God calls people: “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the

⁸² Pope Benedict XVI, *Speeches* (October 3, 2005)
<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/october/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051003_synod-bishops_en.html> (September 20, 2010).

⁸³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Messages* (February 22, 2006)
<http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/youth/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20060222_youth_en.html> (September 20, 2010).

⁸⁴ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 72.

door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me (Revelation 3:20).”

By doing *lectio divina*, prayerful reading of Scripture with assiduity, listening, meditation, and going into it deeply, the faithful hear God’s voice, recognize His will, open the door to welcome Him in their lives, and can be transformed by Him. Through its very long history, there was a time of eclipse. However, the Second Vatican Council has begun its recovery as a powerful and an efficacious instrument in the spiritual life.

3. The four movements of *Lectio Divina* : *Lectio* (Reading) – *Meditatio* (Meditation) – *Oratio* (Prayer) – and *Contemplatio* (Contemplation)

The purpose of the traditional monastic way of doing *lectio divina* was to promote an intimate communion with God, to increase the knowledge of God’s will through reading the Scriptures, and to be transformed in relationships with both God and other people. This is the work of God in His Word and in the grace of the Holy Spirit that touches the minds and hearts of those who dedicate themselves to praying with the Scriptures. Therefore, it is impossible to analyze and understand completely this process by human knowledge. On the one hand, the work of the Holy Spirit is akin to the activities of the wind: “The wind blows where it wills, and you can hear the sound it makes, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes, so it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit (John 3: 8).” In the process of *lectio divina*, the Holy Spirit works freely and the human mind is unable to tie the Spirit down to a system or to concrete and detailed methods of reading. On the other hand, the practical necessity of guiding other people to practice *lectio divina* led to the appearance of instructive texts or books, to attempt to lay out a series of logical steps for *lectio*. In the twelfth century,

Guigo II in his book *The Ladder of Monks*, used the image of Jacob's ladder to consider stages of *lectio divina* as a ladder which leads to a closer intimate communion with God. He named the four steps of this "ladder" of prayer with the Latin terms *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. It appears very difficult to choose the correct term for these four steps. In English texts, authors have used a variety of terms to describe them, such as "steps, stages, degrees, elements, phases, moments and other"⁸⁵, while Mario Masini used the term "times".⁸⁶ In fact, because *lectio divina* is a deepening encounter between each person with God through the Sacred Scriptures, there may be no need for the terms of stages, ladders, or steps. "It is more like one organic process with four 'moments' – reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating – flowing naturally into one another. Each is joined to the other in an interrelated pattern, and to the center where God speaks to the heart. To pay attention to any one of the four is to be in direct relationship with all the others."⁸⁷ As a result, depending on the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, one may begin the private prayer with any moment of the four and move easily from one to another. The high frequency of practicing *lectio divina* will become so much a part of those who dedicate themselves to it that they will no longer need to be conscious of particular steps. "Then *lectio divina* will become a holy rhythm; they will live and breathe and move with God."⁸⁸ However, for reasons of didactic exposition and for the sake of the beginners of this journey, it is customary to divide the process of practicing *lectio divina* into four

⁸⁵ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 46.

⁸⁶ Mario Masini, *Lectio Divina: An Ancient Prayer That Is Ever New*, 51.

⁸⁷ Christine Valters Paintner & Lucy Wynkoop, *Lectio Divina* (New York: Paulist Press, 2008), 4.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

main steps: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. These same four steps will form the outline for practicing this project.

(i) *Lectio* (Reading)

The first step of *lectio divina* is the foundation of the entire tradition, and is named by its Latin term, *lectio*, which means reading – reading the text of sacred Scripture. This is the most important step because if it is done reverently and expectantly, “the Holy Spirit will connect us to the inspired word in a personal way.”⁸⁹ For that reason, a preparation time for this step is very necessary: choose a Scripture passage to pray with, plan at least a half hour of uninterrupted time,⁹⁰ hold the Scripture respectfully in ones hands and thank God for the gift of His word, and pray to the Holy Spirit for help in understanding what God wants to personally communicate to the participant through this practice.⁹¹ The first requirement is to have a degree of privacy. Avoid interruptions and claim a little peace and quiet. Michael Casey speaks of the importance of having a convenient space with three elements of a suitable location, a suitable time, and the cooperation of those with whom the participant lives.⁹²

Lectio is an encounter with the living God who dwells within each person and within the sacred text. It is important to keep in mind that this kind of reading is not like what one does with a newspaper or a book, or even what many actually do with the Bible. “It is completely different. Whereas reading for school or work is often hurried, *lectio* is slow. Whereas reading a magazine is superficial, *lectio* is deep. Whereas reading a novel

⁸⁹ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 47.

⁹⁰ Christine Valters Paintner & Lucy Wynkoop, *Lectio Divina*, 5.

⁹¹ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 48.

⁹² Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, 81.

is for entertainment, *lectio* is for communing with God. Whereas our usual Bible study is so we will know more about God, *lectio* is so we will hear more from God.”⁹³ In other words, an attentive reading is suitable behavior for a full hearing in which God speaks and the practitioner listens “with the ear of his/her heart.”⁹⁴ According to the Rule of St. Benedict, *lectio* refers to the texts of Scripture, the content of the reading. Practically speaking, this step calls for a reading of the sacred text aloud, even when the reading is done in private. Benedict’s rule used the verbs “hear” (*audire*) and “build up” (*aedificare*) with *lectio* to express the impact of the spoken words on the reader.⁹⁵ By hearing the words read aloud, the reader pays full attention and listens more carefully. The sacred text is seen with the eyes and heard with the ear; thus, using both one’s sense of hearing and sight is more effective in attempting to comprehend and memorize the holy text.⁹⁶ The practitioner repeats the reading slowly until a word or phrase touches and finally resides in one’s heart.⁹⁷

The basic task of *lectio* is to answer the question “What does this text say?” As mentioned previously in “Historical Roots of *Lectio Divina*,” the ancients identified the theory of the fourfold sense of Scripture – literal, tropological, allegorical, and anagogical. Modern biblical scholars tend to focus primarily on the literal sense of Scriptures. They work to discover the historical and cultural background of the text and the meaning of particular words, in order to enrich their interpretation and to get to a

⁹³ Tony Jones, *Divine Intervention: Encountering God Through the Ancient Practice of Lectio Divina* (Colorado Spring: Th1nk, 2006), 59.

⁹⁴ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 48.

⁹⁵ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 123.

⁹⁶ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 49.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

better understanding of the meaning of the sacred texts.⁹⁸ This kind of biblical scholarship can be of considerable help at this first step, because St. Jerome (fourth century) insisted on the harmony between biblical scholarship and contemplation; both of these activities must be integrated with each other.⁹⁹ Using biblical commentaries of both the early theologians and modern scholars is very helpful to “understand the multilayered meanings within the Scriptures and enrich our hearing of the inspired word.”¹⁰⁰ In addition, in listening to God’s word, the participant tries to reduce prejudgment, to set aside expectations and assumptions. The goal is to listen to God’s word as if this were the first time the participant heard it. This practice will help the participant to get divine communication with new wisdom and understanding of what God is sharing through the sacred text.¹⁰¹

Because “the Scriptures contain obscurities” such as literal and figurative signs, it can be difficult to deal with ambiguous figurative texts. To address this, Augustine stresses the importance of following the spirit to get the wisdom and not the letter.¹⁰² He also presents a multistep program that begins with a reverent fear of God and a humble search for God’s will. As readers become more familiar with the Scriptures, they see more clearly their attachments to temporal things. At this point, they often repent and turn toward eternal things. While they grow in their knowledge of Scripture, they also

⁹⁸ Christine Valters Paintner & Lucy Wynkoop, *Lectio Divina*, 8.

⁹⁹ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 48.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 53.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰² Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 90.

grow in their love of God, their neighbor, and even their enemies. Finally, readers come to wisdom and true peace.¹⁰³

The final goal of *lectio* is not to stop at the literal sense, but to move into the allegorical sense. It is here that the participants realize that each scripture passage has a multifaceted message that speaks directly to their hearts and lives.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, once the participants have identified a subject of the chosen Scripture that speaks to them, the process of *lectio divina* moves to next step – *meditatio*.

(ii) *Meditatio* (Meditation)

In the ancient monastic tradition, along with reading the Scriptures, Benedict used the words for “memory” (*memoriter*) and “remembering” (*memor*) to suggest that the words read are to stay with the hearer. Memory has a very important part in meditation, because the hearer needs to repeat the words of Scripture until they are remembered. As Jean Leclercq states, “the *meditatio* consists in applying oneself with attention to this exercise in total memorization; it is, therefore, inseparable from the *lectio*.”¹⁰⁵ In addition, *meditatio* also was used to refer to the repetition of already memorized scriptural texts while one worked throughout the day.¹⁰⁶

Ambrose, by his example, taught Augustine the value of a meditative silence with Holy Scripture. Augustine also used the term “mouth of the heart” to describe the event at Ostia. He wrote: “With the mouth of the heart, we panted for the supernal streams

¹⁰³ Ibid., 89.

¹⁰⁴ Christine Valters Paintner & Lucy Wynkoop, *Lectio Divina*, 9.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 124.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 125.

from your fountain, the fountain of life which is with you (Ps 35:10).”¹⁰⁷ In *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, Augustine stated: “Our mouth of the heart drinks the Word of God which enters through ear as medicine for the sick soul, as each disease of the soul has its own remedy in the Bible.”¹⁰⁸ According to Augustine, God is the sweetest food for those with a “healthy palate in one’s heart”. “[The heart] is the spiritual organ with which to receive and respond to the invitation of God’s gospel, and with which to meditate or ruminate on the law of the Lord and ‘every thing that brings salvation’.”¹⁰⁹ Using the image “the mouth of the heart,” Augustine opened the way to share easily about meditation. He compares meditation to the assimilation of food. This image is very successful even in recent times.¹¹⁰ St. Bonaventure admonished his followers: “‘The words of Scripture must always be ruminated in order to be tasted and applied with fervor to the soul.’ This is necessary if the food of the Word is to become part of the reader and thus food for the soul.”¹¹¹

Guigo II described this second step by these words: “When meditation busily applies itself to this work, it does not remain on the outside, is not detained by unimportant things, climbs higher, goes to the heart of the matter, examines each point thoroughly.”¹¹² According to Jerome, all that he had experienced and learned became

¹⁰⁷ Franz Posset, “‘The Palate of The Heart’ in St. Augustine and Medieval Spirituality,” in *Augustine: Biblical Exegete*, eds. Frederick Van Fleteren and Joseph C. Schnaubelt (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2004), 255.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 256.

¹¹⁰ Mario Masini, *Lectio Divina: An Ancient Prayer That Is Ever New*, 109.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 110.

¹¹² Ibid., 108.

second nature to him. That is the reason why the monastic members might practice recalling the day's reading or mediating on Scriptures while they were working.¹¹³

The basic task of *meditatio* is to answer the question "What does this text say to me?" In other words, *meditatio* links the biblical truth contained in the Scriptures to the very real experience of faith in the present world.¹¹⁴ The necessary thing in this step is creating within the heart "a flexible space of resonance, so that the Word can penetrate its deepest parts and touch its innermost fibers."¹¹⁵ After reading and spending time with the sacred text, it becomes like a mirror, reflecting some of the participants' own experiences, challenges, thoughts, and questions. The sacred words gradually become their own words, and "[they] come to realize that God is trying to speak personally to them and offer them a message through the scripture text."¹¹⁶ In short, by reflecting on the sacred text and really spending time to dialogue with it, letting it into their hearts, the participants receive God's personal message. This is the goal of *meditation*.

The allegorical or Christological sense is "an attempt to find added Christian meaning in otherwise arid passages of Scriptures," and "is what emerges when a text is read in a fuller awareness of the spiritual realities about which the text is speaking."¹¹⁷ It means "placing the text within the context of the totality of the Christian story and salvation history."¹¹⁸ In the second step of *meditatio*, prayerful people read scripture through the Christological lens, "the significance of many details and incidents becomes

¹¹³ Ibid., 111.

¹¹⁴ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 59.

¹¹⁵ Mario Masini, *Lectio Divina: An Ancient Prayer That Is Ever New*, 109.

¹¹⁶ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 60-1.

¹¹⁷ Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina* (Liguori: Liguori/Triumph, 1996), 54-5.

¹¹⁸ Christine Valters Paintner & Lucy Wynkoop, *Lectio Divina*, 38.

clear to [them].”¹¹⁹ This lens serves as a means of building up faith, sending God’s message that speaks directly to their hearts and lives. The Christological meanings are often sound, although the ways of reaching them may seem very unusual or strange to the participants.¹²⁰

Using open questions is an excellent way to break down the wall between the content of scriptural texts and one’s life experiences today, and eventually to build a bridge between the two of them. These questions help the participants enter into the process of *meditatio* involving the whole person. Using the head for intellectual activity, these questions may raise the connections between the world of the sacred text and one’s own personal experience, such as “What aspects of the biblical world resemble our situation today? What aspects of our present condition does the text seem to address? What is the text’s message for us right now?”¹²¹ Using the heart for reflective activity, the affective experience about meditation on the sacred text in a deeper way of personal experience may be raised by these questions: “What emotions and memories does this passage evoke within me? Where do I hear Christ speaking to me most personally in these verses? What grace is this text offering me? Which phrase do I want to bring with me to recall throughout the day?”¹²² And, with strength of will, the participants determine to do something that the sacred text offers to change their behaviors by asking questions such as: “What attitudes or habits must I change in order to truly live out these

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, 55.

¹²¹ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 63.

¹²² Ibid., 64.

inspired words? Why am I so resistant to reflecting on this text more carefully?”¹²³ In addition, for people who are familiar with the spiritual exercises of St. Ignatius, they may meditate on a sacred text through the use of their imagination, and five bodily senses: sight, smell, taste, touch, and hearing.¹²⁴

In summary, through taking time for meditation, the person praying *lectio* creates a space in which the Word of God interacts with his/her thoughts, feelings, and memories. This step “is an integration of repetitive recitation, reminiscence, discursive thinking, or feeling, and a resolution to bring the Bible to life through some personal application. These activities are fluid and interrelated, and together evoke parallels and connections not only with other biblical texts, but also with personal insights, emotions, and experiences.”¹²⁵ This second step of *meditatio* prepares the participant to enter more readily into intimate dialogue with God in the next steps of *oratio* and *contemplatio*.

(iii) *Oratio* (Prayer)

Although this third step is called prayer, it does not mean that the preceding steps are not also forms of prayer. In fact, *oratio* actually begins its preparation at the moment when the participants start the process of *lectio divina*, and continues as they move to deeper and deeper levels of prayer. However, *oratio* is “a special moment within this conversation with God that we can specifically consecrate to prayer from the heart.”¹²⁶ In her book “Too Deep for Words” Thelma Hall defined the *oratio* process in the following way: “*Oratio* is the active effort we make to keep our hearts open to [God] and

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 66.

¹²⁵ Karl A. Schultz, *How to Pray With the Bible: The Ancient Prayer Form of Lectio Divina Made Simple* (Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 2007), 80.

¹²⁶ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 72.

to put ourselves at the disposal of His Spirit, preparing the way for God's action to supersede our own."¹²⁷ Prayerful reading and meditation on the scriptural text is the root of *oratio*. The words that the participants have carefully listened to in *lectio* and pondered in *meditatio* become the very center of their *oratio* experiences.¹²⁸

How can the participants distinguish between the praying of *lectio divina* as a whole and the third step of *oratio*? The basic task of *oratio* is to answer to the question "What do I want to say to God after reading and reflecting on this text as well as recognizing God's invitation?" In this type of prayer, the participants are called to simply react to the sacred text. When they have a dry spell in prayer, they return to the text for fresh nourishment.¹²⁹ Specifically, *oratio* is the work of the heart, more than the work of the mind and knowledge. As Thelma Hall described it: "there is less and less reasoning and speculating with the intellect, as the heart takes over in a simple pouring out of love and desire, which may take the form of an intimate interior dialogue."¹³⁰

According to Benedict's experiences, "the prayer (*oratio*) focuses the self around the words read and meditated and leads to a heartfelt response to God, often in the form of sorrow or tears."¹³¹ In fact, after listening to and reflecting on the sacred text in which God speaks to the participant in a personal way, it is natural for him/her to respond and to speak to God. Therefore, "*lectio* and *meditatio* were at the service of *oratio* – the person's heartfelt response to God's word."¹³² Depending on God's messages, the

¹²⁷ Thelma Hall, *Too Deep For Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 42.

¹²⁸ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 72.

¹²⁹ Mario Masini, *Lectio Divina: An Ancient Prayer That Is Ever New*, 114.

¹³⁰ Thelma Hall, *Too Deep For Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, 42.

¹³¹ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 126.

¹³² *Ibid*, 125.

participants may react by expressing their emotions to the movement of God within, and their prayers may stir up a wide range of feelings. They may respond with an act of praise, thanksgiving, a petition or true repentance. *Oratio* may even have the opposite effect, and stir up rebelliousness, a crying lament, or an angry outbreak.¹³³

After reading and listening to God's word in the first step, as well as repeating it in the second step, now the third step makes the sacred text come more fully alive for the participants. They might have an experience of spiritual power to transform their hearts. As a result, God's words that have been meditated on, and the words that the Holy Spirit inspires them to say are combined to become their heartfelt prayers.¹³⁴ *Oratio* is also a gift of God, with which the participants realize their ability and desire to pray within their hearts, rather than just with thoughts in their heads. The Second Vatican Council proclaimed that the Scriptures contain "a wonderful treasury of prayers (DV 15)"¹³⁵, therefore "they are particularly helpful texts for nourishing the prayer of *lectio divina*."¹³⁶ After opening the gospel's pages, one can learn the model for the prayer of *oratio*. First, Jesus taught his followers to pray by his example, especially by His prayer the "Our Father." With this prayer He established a new relationship between God and human people, making them sons and daughters of God. His prayer, the "Our Father" is also a model for the *oratio*, in which there are four qualities in this prayer that are also the four characteristics of the *oratio*: simplicity, directness, honesty, and confidence.¹³⁷ Second, Mary is an example of a person who practiced *lectio divina* carefully. As St. Luke wrote:

¹³³ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 72.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹³⁵ Second Vatican Council, *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II*, 384.

¹³⁶ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 78.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 82.

“[Mary] kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart (Luke 2:19).” Mary had spent her whole life hearing the Hebrew Scriptures, noticing what miraculous things God had done for Israel as well as for herself, listening attentively to God’s word, and meditating on and reflecting on what God’s word meant to her. As a result, she was able to respond in *oratio* with her whole heart: “I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word (Lk 1:38).”¹³⁸

How does the participant keep the proper balance between reading and prayer while nurturing the gift of *oratio*? As the participants read, listen and reflect on the Scriptures, they must be careful not to substitute reading for prayer. They must leave behind some of their darker sides caused by their own impatient search for the lesser light of their limited intellectual faculties. Then they can come to a lighter side of inspiration with God’s word, and having been illuminated, and they can thereby gain a more subtle and intuitive awareness of God, a special relationship with God, which dawns slowly. St. Theresa of Avila (sixteenth century) uses a helpful image to explain this: When a small fire has been lighted by their prayers, to keep this fire continuing to burn, one needs to place a twig or two upon it from time to time. This twig is a few words of the Scriptures in her analogy. If one throws the branches upon it meaning a lengthy reading of Scriptures and intellectual activity, the small fire will be extinguished.¹³⁹

In *lectio divina*, “our prayer goes hand in hand with reading and meditation. These movements do not mechanically shift from one to another. Rather, each movement forms a spiral in which we continually travel through reading, meditation, and

¹³⁸ Ibid., 83.

¹³⁹ Thelma Hall, *Too Deep For Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, 44.

prayer, but each time on a new level. Through this spiral motion, we move upward toward a greater awareness of God and downward into our hearts.”¹⁴⁰ Depending on their personal preference, the participants can express their prayers by praying spontaneously, either aloud or silently, or by writing in their own personal journal.¹⁴¹ One of the effects of *oratio* is an increase in holy desire: “God creates in us a greater capacity for Himself, not only by our longing but sometimes through the very frustration and powerlessness we experience as we reach out blindly toward him. It is as though we are being drawn by a magnetic force in our own depths, toward God as our center of gravity, where that center coincides with our true self.”¹⁴² This fruit of holy desire in *oratio* not only takes place in the participants’ prayers, but also expands into their everyday lives by encouraging them to live out their prayers through their actions. In this way, the moral, or behavioral, sense of the Scriptures is expressed, because the moral sense of the Scriptures “refers to the way God’s Word shapes our beliefs and values so that we slowly live into the meaning of them.”¹⁴³

All three successive steps of *lectio*, *meditatio*, and *oratio* thus far have involved the participant’s activity, and have remained factors that are more noticeable, and the use of words which seems normal as well. However, prayer “is not always about doing something, it is about being in relationship with someone.”¹⁴⁴ Therefore, in the next step of *contemplatio*, the participant is invited to take a rest in the presence of God, in which

¹⁴⁰ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 73.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴² Thelma Hall, *Too Deep For Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, 43.

¹⁴³ Christine Valters Paintner & Lucy Wynkoop, *Lectio Divina*, 51.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 53.

words are unnecessary because there is a language of silence. In other words, they are moving from active prayer to contemplative prayer.

(iv) *Contemplatio* (Contemplation)

Oratio is akin to the way leading to *contemplation*. However, in the perspective of tending to be of a categorizing mentality, it is impossible to tell the participant what sign will show at the exact moment of the transition as this step of *contemplatio* begins. As mentioned above, *lectio divina* is a dynamic process in which there is more spontaneous activity than a planned process. The dividing of the process of practicing *lectio divina* into steps is just made to benefit the didactic exposition for the learning beginners. Moreover, all first three steps are meant to bring the participant to *contemplatio* in which “God’s grace is truly at work there, and his Holy Spirit is changing us without our direct knowledge.”¹⁴⁵ Therefore, the difficulty is giving a definite and conscious way to move onto the next step. The only thing necessary is that the participant just continues to be lead into the experience of quietly being in God’s presence.

For persons who are beginners of the practice of *lectio divina*, they need to pay attention to *contemplatio*’s issues. First, *contemplatio* demands that “we let go of any effort to be ‘in charge’ of our lives.”¹⁴⁶ Therefore, the idea of praying *contemplatio* is just being in the presence of God without doing something. This is often difficult to accept for those who tend to be pragmatic intellectuals. Another difficulty is influences of the Western mind-set or culture in which people are defined primarily by doing rather

¹⁴⁵ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 86.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

than being. Most people feel that simply being in the presence of God without saying prayers or meditating on something seems like a waste of time. As a result, one can observe in the society, people lack the right appreciation for “being” and this creates a void in their lives. This is one of the reasons why nowadays, there are persons who are looking for “the ‘Higher Power’ that does not depend on what [they] do and what [they] accomplish, but on who [they] are at the deepest level.”¹⁴⁷ This aspiration can be satisfied through *contemplatio*.¹⁴⁸ Second, reading the stories about saints and mystics has lead many readers to think that *contemplatio* has often been related with unusual phenomena separated from ordinary life. As a result, people may have a tendency to misrepresent contemplative people as dreamy and withdrawn from the world. In fact, contemplation does not always attach with a mystical experience. Since “genuine contemplation promotes what is most authentically human within us,... [and] ...contemplative union with God is the most human experience that life offers.”¹⁴⁹ Moreover, it is in *contemplation*, in which the participants separate themselves from everyday thoughts and the crowd, that they “experience a truer union with humanity than the superficial connections our culture offers today.”¹⁵⁰ Paradoxically, it also makes them more concerned for the world in which they live.

The basic task of *contemplatio* is the answer to the question “What difference does this text make in my life?” With Augustine’s experience, reading the Scriptures looks like a journey throughout three steps: “from a sensory involvement with texts to an

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 88.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

intellectual comprehension of what those texts meant, and finally, no longer focused on the physical text, to a contemplation of the realities they communicated.”¹⁵¹ In Augustine’s view, the Scripture is the sweetest food for the soul, when a person reads and contemplates on it, one enjoys its sweetness.¹⁵² Like Augustine, Bernard defines the setting necessary for experiencing God and his sweetness as a sitting “in silence”. He described that “he sits ‘in silence’ and waits to see whether perhaps he will experience something of the ‘intimate sweetness’ which the holy prophet ‘burps up’. ‘It is good to wait for the Lord in silence.’ Leisure is meant for contemplation. It is ‘holy quietness’ for which there is never enough time.”¹⁵³ Thelma Hall gave an excellent description of contemplation as follows:

Contemplation is variously described as “resting” in God, or “loving gaze” upon Him, or “knowing beyond knowing,” or a “rapt attention” to God. All such attempts at verbalizing the experience necessarily fail to express the reality, for the simple reason that contemplation transcends the thinking and reasoning of meditation, as well as the emotions and “feelings” of the affective faculties. It is basically a prayer and experience of pure faith.¹⁵⁴

Contemplation is the entering into a relationship of faith and love with the God of truth and life, who has revealed His face to human beings in Christ as well as on every page of the Bible. On the people’s side, they may cooperate by creating space for contemplation in their lives, “but ultimately the ability to move into a loving state of being and stillness is a gift from the One who is the Source of All Love.”¹⁵⁵ The participants are poignantly conscious of God’s call to just be during times of

¹⁵¹ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 77.

¹⁵² Franz Posset, “‘The Palate of The Heart’ in St. Augustine and Medieval Spirituality,” 257.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 259.

¹⁵⁴ Thelma Hall, *Too Deep For Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina* 9.

¹⁵⁵ Christine Valters Paintner & Lucy Wynkoop, *Lectio Divina*, 56.

contemplation. They patiently wait for God's word and response to them in this silence.¹⁵⁶

Although the dispositions of receiving, being, and listening are operative throughout the preceding steps of *lectio divina*, these dispositions are most prominent during contemplation, and it is here that their synthesis and culmination occurs.¹⁵⁷ In contemplation, the participant has the experience of the divine signs which are authentic in the fact that they are "morally consistent with God's communication of Himself in the life of the Church".¹⁵⁸ By opening and responding to divine signs and God's plan in life, one gets a calming, inner peace and God's consolation. One may receive benefits of being healthy, relaxed, or managing stress. However these are not its goals. The goals of this step are mainly "on the spiritual level to slow and calm us down, put our lives in perspective, and dispose us to God's wise and consoling influence."¹⁵⁹ Although "contemplation is a high human activity, and it is true that at this moment not all are capable of it,"¹⁶⁰ it is important to note that contemplation and its fruits are not a reward for exerting of human acts. Contemplation is a gift from God who provides for those who are faithful and are ready to accept what God desires to give them as a result of their faithfulness to the earlier steps.¹⁶¹

From all that is mentioned above, one may recognize a broad view of the four-step format traditional monastic process of *lectio divina* by Pope John Paul II's words:

¹⁵⁶ Karl A. Schultz, *How to Pray With the Bible: The Ancient Prayer Form of Lectio Divina Made Simple*, 91.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 92.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 94.

¹⁶⁰ Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, 60.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 59.

A time-honoured way to study and savour the word of God is *lectio divina* which constitutes a real and veritable spiritual journey marked out in stages. After the *lectio*, which consists of reading and rereading a passage from Sacred Scripture and taking in the main elements, we proceed to *meditatio*. This is a moment of interior reflection in which the soul turns to God and tries to understand what his word is saying to us today. Then comes *oratio* in which we linger to talk with God directly. Finally we come to *contemplatio*. This helps us to keep our hearts attentive to the presence of Christ whose word is “a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts” (2 Pet 1:19). Reading, study and meditation of the Word should then flow into a life of consistent fidelity to Christ and his teachings.¹⁶²

4. *Operatio*: changing the self and transforming the world

As mentioned above, *lectio divina* has its purpose in promoting an intimate communion with God, and transforming both relationships with God and with other people. Moreover, God’s word is the living word and has its dynamic power under the leadership or guidance of the Holy Spirit to transform the readers. The key is to be aware that *lectio divina* is an activity of the whole person; therefore in prayer, the participant offers the whole self. Thelma Hall stated that: “the goal of prayer is not thoughts or concepts or knowledge about God, however sublime, but God himself as He is, mysteriously hidden in my deepest, true self.”¹⁶³ Therefore, according to Michael Casey, a Cistercian monk, the participants doing *lectio divina* need to open themselves to the action of grace and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, by dropping their defenses and allowing God to touch their hearts and to change their lives.¹⁶⁴ Doing this transition from prayer to action, the participants make a gentle resolution to apply what they received in

¹⁶² Pope Benedict XVI, *Messages* (February 22, 2006), (September 20, 2010).

¹⁶³ Thelma Hall, *Too Deep For Words: Rediscovering Lectio Divina*, 41.

¹⁶⁴ Michael Casey, *Sacred Reading: The Ancient Art of Lectio Divina*, 6.

lectio divina into practice. In other words, the natural consequence of well-practiced *lectio divina*, that the participants will live out what they became aware of in their practice of the first four steps. Therefore, a fifth step of *lectio divina* is added in the form of *Operatio* (Acting).

Looking back at Origen's method of reading the Scriptures, his approach is to read in a context of prayer to gain a sense of what God is asking of persons in their particular circumstances. Origen often reminds his audiences that "divine reading along with constant prayer and the word of doctrine are what nourish the spirit."¹⁶⁵ At the same time, he tries to provide for his hearers the "opportunities for understanding" by encouraging them "to return to the source, the Scriptures, and further their understanding through reading and prayer."¹⁶⁶ Origen used the metaphor of "digging" to describe the process of reading the Scriptures for spiritual meaning, akin to digging wells and drawing water from them. He encouraged his audience to do their own digging both in Scriptures and in their own souls because each soul is "a well of living water." As the result, "rivers of living water" will proceed from them, and they will grow in understanding and spiritual perception. Using these images, Origen intends that the reading of Holy Scriptures, with an attitude of attention and concentration as well as prayer, will bring contact with the deeper meaning of the Scriptures; and so bring about the transformation of the readers. This transformation will teach and instruct the readers in how to serve others most faithfully. Moreover, this personal transformation will help to convert a person from their sinful state to perfection. In prayerful contact with the Scriptures,

¹⁶⁵ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 50.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 51.

people encounter the living Word and are healed.¹⁶⁷ Origen called this a faith journey that purifies them from sin. By working with God's grace, the reader removes conflicting images that have obscured the image of God within them. Reading Scripture helps willing people to cut off their connections with evil and to practice good works. In particular, they need to hear the Word and to act on it, in order to root out sin and to practice virtues.¹⁶⁸ As a result, moving towards this path of purification, "the heavenly image is restored, the inner rather than outer person thrives, and within that inner self the spiritual senses are awakened and begin to aid in discerning the direction in which to go."¹⁶⁹ By that way, Origen's method of reading the Scriptures helps the readers to allow the divine text "to speak to the present moment of readers and influence their continuing spiritual development." That is reason why commentators called Origen's approach to reading existential.¹⁷⁰

According to St. Jerome, reading the Scriptures has benefits "as a way of integrating and unifying a fragmented self" as well as "fortifying the self against evil."¹⁷¹ In view of Augustine's conversion experience, encountering Christ, the Mediator, in reading the Scriptures is "technology for shaping and forming the self."¹⁷² In fact, "[it] was truly a transformative experience; a reader, through a contemplation of the scriptural text, moves inward and upward to a higher understanding and then to an ethically

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 40-44.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 46.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., 51.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 67.

¹⁷² Ibid., 76.

informed life.”¹⁷³ According to Bernard, *lectio* is a tool that can often shape and form those who are beginning the monastic life by providing a place for developing a deep spiritual experience and by actually transforming the selves of adult initiates.¹⁷⁴ In his sermons, Bernard tried to train his listeners “not only in reading the Scriptures but also in reading their own past experience in the light of how they read the Scriptures.”¹⁷⁵

Studying John Cassian’s mystical writings, Michael Foucault (1925 – 1984), a French philosopher and cultural analyst, showed that “Cassian’s works present a detailed approach to the care of the self leading to a knowledge of the self and thus describe a way of fulfilling two ancient imperatives: ‘Know yourself’ and ‘Take care of yourself’.”¹⁷⁶ Foucault stressed two forms of confession that serve to build up the self-renunciation: *exomologesis*, when a person declares oneself a sinner through some ritual proclamation, and *exagoreusis* which is sharing the thoughts, fantasies, and intentions that pass through one’s mind with the guidance of the spiritual elder to learn to discriminate good thoughts from bad.¹⁷⁷ However, not only these two forms of Christian confession, but also *lectio divina* is an important technology to human development in the monastic life because, through reading Scriptures that are geared to helping in the discovery of what is hidden inside the self, creation of a new self is facilitated.¹⁷⁸

Talal Asad, a British anthropologist, who was influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, has approached monastic rituals such as the liturgy and reading the Scriptures,

¹⁷³ Ibid., 76.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 150.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 155.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 120.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 121.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

“with the explicit aim of shaping and forming virtuous selves.”¹⁷⁹ In fact, reading is a tool that shapes the self by the fact that “the reader tries to imitate the saintly exemplar of whom they read.”¹⁸⁰ This process is explained in that “reading is demanding and requires the pain of regular practice and the arduous task of paying attention and remembering.”¹⁸¹ At the same time, “memory is not just a mental process affecting the mind to remember what is read, but an inscription in the body that mouths the words and acts in accord with them in daily life.”¹⁸² In other words, reading is really a physical exercise that trains the person to act in certain ways, in which a new self begins to emerge. As the reader progresses, their monastic self with a humble, obedient, and pure heart begins to come into being.¹⁸³

It is in the process of doing *lectio divina* that the participants are led to an intimate environment in which they can express themselves in a deep personal manner with God. “Sharing our feelings, needs, and concerns with God enables us to avoid unhealthy repression, see our situation and ourselves more clearly, and tap into the source of our strength and deliverance.”¹⁸⁴ The participants will also be able to be healed of their frustrations and darkest emotions as they share with God their hopes and open themselves to God’s guidance, healing, and transformation.¹⁸⁵ Cardinal Carlo M. Martini, a biblical scholar, combined the traditional four-step method of *lectio divina* with the practice of the Exercises of the spirit of Ignatius to introduce his method of praying with the

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 126.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 127.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 128.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 127-8.

¹⁸⁴ Karl A. Schultz, *How to Pray With the Bible: The Ancient Prayer Form of Lectio Divina Made Simple*, 87.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 87.

Scriptures with eight steps. The additional steps included in his method are *consolatio*, *discretio*, *deliberatio*, and *actio*. Martini's goal is to help move the participants "from contemplation to action, tracing an outward progression from *lectio divina* back to daily life."¹⁸⁶ According to Martini, the practice of *lectio divina* could at times provide an occasion of experiencing the deep joy of God's presence in a consoling manner (*consolatio*), and of getting insight from God's word for discerning (*discretio*). The practice of *lectio divina* is also helpful in making decisions regarding what a person is called to do as they follow the Holy Spirit's guidance to be the disciples of Jesus in their lives, and then of choosing (*deliberatio*) that option. Finally they are called to act (*actio*) according to the Word of God that they have received and prayed about through the process of *lectio divina*.¹⁸⁷

From the explanations above, one may be aware of the fact that Scriptures has its own power to create change. Praying *lectio divina* can never stop with just communicating ideas; it must be oriented toward personal transformation. Everyone who is faithfully practicing *lectio divina* in their prayer must be changed in some specific way. As Talal Asad explained in the anthropologist's view: "it is clear that this work of transformation required a skillful deployment of biblical language so that it might resonate with, and reintegrate, the pleasurable memories and desires that had been fashioned in a previous secular life."¹⁸⁸ In *operatio*, by living out God's message that they have heard in their hearts, they become witnesses of the process of changing

¹⁸⁶ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 101.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., 102-3.

¹⁸⁸ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 155.

themselves under sacred words; and then they can also co-operate with others in transforming the world.

5. *Collatio*: Practicing *Lectio Divina* in a support group

The Latin word *collatio* originally meant a “bringing together or comparison,” or an “interchange or discussion.”¹⁸⁹ Later this word came to designate a shared meal to which everyone contributes and at which all is shared. In *lectio divina*, the word of *collatio* is used to describe its communal practice in which each member of a supportive group converses and shares insights that they have gotten in individual prayer.¹⁹⁰ In this context, God’s sacred word is akin to the shared meal. These members are often those who live together in the community or work together in the same mission.

In the early centuries, when the Scriptures were made as handwritten books, or manuscript books, a person who owned the Scriptures was rare. Therefore in the monastic community, when doing *lectio divina* the monks often gathered to hear the sacred word read aloud and slowly. Each monastic member took a word or phrase into their mind and heart. Then, trying to memorize and repeat it to themselves, they continued meditating, praying, and contemplating in private. And then, they shared with the others what each person had understood from the text. The *lectio divina* was ended with prayers both aloud and in silence, which the members offered to God as their response to the message they had received.¹⁹¹ From the fifteenth century to the present, when the technology of the printed book was born and developed, every person could easily get a bible for themselves to read and to pray with during private prayer time.

¹⁸⁹ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 109.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid., 110.

However, this form of *lectio divina* has become increasingly popular not only in developing countries where books are still lacking, but also in countries where bibles are readily available for everyone. The main reason for the development of *lectio divina* is its communal dimension. As Karl A. Schultz explained, “*lectio divina* is a communication process, it has an innate interpersonal component.”¹⁹² Looking back on salvation history, one could say that God revealed Himself through divine revelations. A part of these revelations are presented in Sacred Scripture which contained significant events in the life of Israel, of Jesus, and of the early Church. God speaks to the human race, particularly to Israel, whose people belong to a chosen nation. Therefore, God’s word has been directed first and foremost to a community, in other words, the Scripture “is a community document in origin, development, and application.”¹⁹³ For this reason, it is natural to practice *lectio divina* in a group. Each member of the group learns not only to place their own lives into the salvation history of God’s people throughout the ages, but also to deepen and enrich the spiritual experience of individual prayer. After spending time in private prayer with the Scriptures following the method of *lectio divina*, they share in a supportive group their understanding, wisdom, and insights that they have received in their prayer time. According to Augustine, “reading the Scriptures occurs in the context of a community of faith, a community of interpretation. This community of readers acquires its own corporate memory and hands on its knowledge to those who will

¹⁹² Karl A. Schultz, *How to Pray With The Bible: The Ancient Prayer Form of Lectio Divina Made Simple*, 122.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

follow.”¹⁹⁴ They inform how God lives in their lives and how God’s word affects their behaviors. By doing this, they also enrich the lives of others.

According to the rule of St. Benedict, in chapter 72 “The Good Zeal of Monks”, he wrote: “This, then, is the good zeal which monks must foster with fervent love: They should each try to be the first to show respect to the other (Rom 12:10), supporting with the greatest patience one another's weaknesses of body or behavior, and earnestly competing in obedience to one another.”¹⁹⁵ Having this virtue of obedience is the result of the community life that is shaped and is nourished by reading the Word in the Liturgy of the Hours and in their practice of *lectio divina*.¹⁹⁶

On the one hand, in his writings Gregory the Great (ca. 540 – 604) described the wonderful benefits of a personal and solitary encounter in doing *lectio divina*. On the other hand, Gregory also was interested in the role of the community in coming to a fuller understanding of the meaning of the Scriptures. He wrote: “For I know that in the presence of my brothers and sisters I have very often understood many things in the sacred text that I could not understand alone.”¹⁹⁷ According to Gregory, “The community assumes the role of making the Word come alive. Understanding is a community act because dialogue itself is a community act. God does not speak to the hearts of individuals; he addressed himself to all.”¹⁹⁸ In Jesus’ teaching, He affirmed the power of community prayer: “I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything

¹⁹⁴ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 88.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 129.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 129-30.

¹⁹⁷ Mariano Magrassi, *Praying The Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina*, trans. Edward Hagman, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1998), 10.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 10.

for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them” (Mt 18:19-20).

One of the ways to value the authentic and efficacious practice of doing *lectio divina* is to notice the change in the participants’ hearts and in their behaviors which bear fruit in fraternal charity. The fruit of the contemplation of the Bible as God’s Word is love: love of God and love of neighbor. Do the participants live in ways that God’s love is visible to those around them, because, “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for whoever does not love a brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 Jn 4:20). According to Augustine, “the purpose of reading and striving to understand the Scriptures is love”. He believed that whoever thought that he understood the Scriptures or any part of them, but whose understanding did not contain the double love of God and of our neighbor, did not understand God’s word at all.¹⁹⁹ It is in *lectio divina* that the participants learn from the lesson of God’s heart, they receive a deeper awareness of God’s love, and they will live as God’s witness in the world today. The more of whatever insight, feeling, or commitment they get from their prayer time with Scripture, the more they want to share as grace with others, especially those with whom they live and work. God’s grace transforms their lives and, consequently, witnesses to God’s transforming grace for others. As Pope John Paul II said to the young people:

In your groups, dear young people, multiply the occasions for hearing and studying the word of the Lord, especially through the *lectio divina*. You

¹⁹⁹ Raymond Studzinski, *Reading To Live: The Evolving Practice of Lectio Divina*, 88.

will discover the secrets of the Heart of God and will derive profit for discerning situations and transforming reality. Guided by Holy Scripture, you will be able to recognize the Lord's presence in your daily life; and even the “desert” can then become a “garden”, where it is possible for the creature to talk familiarly with the Creator: “When I am reading divine Scripture, God walks again in the earthly Paradise” (St. Ambrose, *Epistle* 49,3).²⁰⁰

²⁰⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Messages* (August 15, 1996),
 <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/messages/youth/documents/hf_jp-ii_mes_15081996_xii-world-youth-day_en.html> (September 30, 2010)

CHAPTER III

COMMUNITY LIFE

The value of community life for the diocesan priest was rediscovered in the document *Presbyterium Ordinis* of the Second Vatican Council with the concept of the *presbyterium*, and was one of the great fruits of this Council. The importance of the priest collaborating with other priests and with their bishop in the ministry and governance of his Church is found in articles 7-9, entitled the “Priests’ Relation with Others.” This renewal is not simply a theological concept, but needs to be implemented and realized in concrete and juridical ways, as the Code of Canon Law confirmed: “Since clerics all work for the same purpose, namely, the building up of the Body of Christ, they are to be united among themselves by a bond of brotherhood and prayer and are to strive for cooperation among themselves according to the prescripts of particular law (Can. 275 §1).”

Therefore, one of the vital factors in the formation of a candidate to the priesthood is community life, since “a successful seminary community also depends on the establishment of interpersonal relationships characterized by a family-like trust and brotherly type friendships.”²⁰¹ Thus, the seminary needs to establish an atmosphere of fraternal community in the human relationships that are exercised and developed there. The Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education in *A Guide to Formation in Priestly*

²⁰¹ Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy*, 1974, *Norms for Priestly Formation*, Vol. I, ed. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 193.

Celibacy provided guidelines to build up this atmosphere of fraternal community by using the tools of group dynamics within small groups:

To promote personal formation one must place students in an environment which is favorable to the development of all their qualities and potential. To help achieve this, while always protecting the unity of the seminary, circumstances may encourage the division of students into smaller groups. This system is helpful in activating the bonds which bind each to the other, in ensuring a fair division of tasks between members of the group in accordance with each one's abilities and directing them to the common good.²⁰²

In addition to using small groups for organizing the quotidian tasks of the seminarians' daily life together, it is desirable to use these very same groups to foster their spiritual growth. The life of prayer in formation is critical because no one can assume the regenerative power of communal life without prayer. Pope Benedict XVI showed the relationship between prayer life and community life: "If we do not enter into the eternal dialogue of the Son with the Father in the Holy Spirit no authentic communal life is possible. It is necessary to be with Jesus so as to be able to be with others."²⁰³ Group *lectio divina* provides an excellent means of nurturing good group dynamics and a communal prayer life. This goes beyond "rote" participation in prayer. It offers opportunities for expression of some of the deep spiritual connections experienced in Liturgy, Holy Mass, the Divine Office, the Rosary, and personal meditation on the Scriptures. Therefore, in addition to private prayer time, it is helpful to use small groups in praying together by practicing *lectio divina* with each group to deepen personal prayer. The seminarians can create these groups to become an environment of faith for sharing

²⁰² Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education, *A Guide to Formation in Priestly Celibacy*, 1974, *Norms for Priestly Formation*, Vol. I, ed. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 193-4.

²⁰³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Papal Address to Fraternity of St. Charles* (February 13, 2011).
<<http://www.zenit.org/article-31738?l=english>> (March 13, 2011).

God's words. Moreover, they also practice the skills needed to live in community and learn to relate well with one another as they continue their personal development.

1. Skills needed to live in community life

Living in this world, people are all part of interconnected systems which they affect and in turn affect them. People have experienced that they do not thrive when isolated from others. Everyone has an identity in belonging to a community. This community may be a nation, an ethnic group, an organization, a religious institution, a political party, or a group formed in some other way. It is important for anyone living in a community to be aware that living in a community is sharing life in different ways, rather than merely living next to one another. In addition to their private times, seminarians have time to pray together, to study together, to work together, and to play together. The goal of this life style is open communication, understanding, mutual respect, and cooperation in ministry within this institution of the Church. Pope Benedict XVI emphasized this community aspect of priestly life when he stated:

“It is important for priests not to live off on their own somewhere, in isolation, but to accompany one another in small communities, to support one another, and so to experience, and constantly realize afresh, their communion in service to Christ and in renunciation for the sake of the Kingdom of heaven.”²⁰⁴

Therefore, in the formation process of the seminary, it is quite important to prepare seminarians for the “give and take” which will be needed for priestly community life. They need to have some balance between shared group time and private time.

²⁰⁴ Benedict XVI, *Light of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 149.

The priestly vocation journey is a response to God's call and depends on the free will of each person. Freedom to respond to God's call is important, yet there is a need for accountability to other people because the priest's mission is "to live and work by the power of the Holy Spirit in service of the Church and for the salvation of the world (PO.12)." Personal freedom must be woven into the fabric of community life. Therefore, the process of priestly formation needs to help the candidates to be able to work with the others in any community to which the Bishop sends him to serve. In fact, the seminarian is not alone on his journey. He enacts his priestly vocation in the community environment. He accepts and follows the spiritual way with companions beside him. He is aware that the seminary community is the analogue of later parish experience. In Vietnamese culture, community life in seminary or in any organization is modeled on the family bond. As a family has its ups and downs, the love for the community as a whole helps members to be ready to accept one another's imperfections every day. The more he lives in harmony with the other seminarians, the more he learns how to work with the parishioners in the future.

On the other hand, human beings have a tendency towards selfishness, to concern themselves chiefly or only with their own interests, benefits, welfare, and advantage, regardless of others. Each person has the interior challenge of overcoming selfishness that destroys harmony within a community. In his experience as a rector, Robert F. Laavitt stated: "Seminarians need to be formed in a way that forming healthy relationships and having the energy and imagination to sustain them is paramount. They

also need to be formed in a way that helps them put communities first.”²⁰⁵ Therefore, living in seminary, the seminarians try as best they can to pursue harmony between the individual and the community. This training requires each person to exert himself to the utmost since there is a paradox that “we need personalities who can survive with a lot of solitude and independently and at the same time personalities who can create communities and not become dependent on them.”²⁰⁶ In addition, depending on their personality and the influences from familial and societal conditioning, living together in a community is easy for some people, but is not for others. Those who have difficulty living in community can improve their situation by developing certain practices through which they will experience satisfaction, peace and joy even if this requires sacrifice and mortification of the will. Their true desires for friendship and community will be revealed to them through the practices described below.

(i) Praying to see Christ’s image in all people:

In Saul’s conversion experience at Damascus, he left Jerusalem to persecute Christians; the Lord revealed Himself as one with these Christians when He said “I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” (cf. Acts 26: 14-18). After this life-changing encounter, Saul became Paul, the Apostle of Christ Jesus, by the will of God (1 Cor 1:1), and he learned the central truth about communion in Christ: to persecute Christians is to persecute Christ. Christ and the Christians are one. In the Gospel according to St. Matthew, Jesus Christ who is present in the form of the least of their brothers and sisters

²⁰⁵ Robert F. Laavitt, *The Formation of Priests for a New Century: Theological and Spiritual Challenges, The Core Elements of Priestly Formation Programs: A Collection of Reading*, Vol.3 (Washington DC: National Catholic Educational Association, 2005), 27.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

said, “Whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me (Mt 25:40).” In fact, by virtue of baptism Christians have been joined into Christ. This oneness includes bearing His image, and being holy as He is holy. The more people develop a deep awareness of Christ’s image in one another, the more easily they love and care for people as their brothers and sisters. This is the inescapable vocation of all the faithful. How can they develop a deep awareness of Christ’s image in their brothers and sisters? The answer is found in a prayer life that nourishes and sustains the relationship between people and God. As a fruit of this prayer life, people have a deep personal communion with God, which they express in relationships with others, seeing with God’s eyes and loving with God’s heart.

In the Gospel according to Saint Luke, Jesus emphasizes that prayer is not only a desirable thing or just a good thing to do, but it is a necessity (cf. Lk 18: 1). The act of prayer itself is a relationship between people and God. People pray because they believe that God is there for them. The closer their relationship with God, the more time they spend with Him in prayer. Once they experience Christ’s encounter in their prayer, their lives will never be the same. When a person finds Christ, this prayer time will help to deepen one’s relationship with God and then to allow this relationship to guide all of one’s actions in daily life. They find Jesus Christ in others, especially in the suffering, the sick, the poor, the marginalized, the oppressed, and the powerless, in order to love them and to serve them as Jesus taught and did. As a result of their prayer, they practice their faith regularly and actively. They recognize that the people who live around them

bear Christ's image, and respect them as their brothers and sisters. They will become loving and caring people because love reflects God's presence in them.

(ii) Earning and Extending Trust

Trust is the basis of life. Without trust, no human being can live. In community relationships, trust is essential because it not only helps to strengthen the bonds that unite each person in the community, but it also makes peace among them. Viewed as a personal quality, trust indicates a depth and a sense of assurance that is based on reliance. This reliance is created by the integrity, compassion, talent, or strength of another person, as well as confidence in the sharing process of a community. By trust, they may share their thoughts and feelings without fear of judgment or negative criticism.²⁰⁷

In healthy community life, trust makes for a sense of being safe or of being free of fear, so that one can easily share joys, happiness, sorrows, anxious longings, contradictory emotions, or secrets. Trust enables persons to share their life stories and experiences, gain insight into their own situations of conflict, and receive help and strength for creative living.²⁰⁸ When people have a strong sense of trust, it becomes easier for them to enjoy life. Very similar to hope, trust relies on future possibilities as well as current realities, and is a necessary foundation for community life.²⁰⁹

According to the sociologists, Roger Mayer, James Davis, and David Schoorman there are three characteristics that are deemed to be essential to the development and

²⁰⁷ C. W. Brister, "Trust In Pastoral Relationships," in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, ed. R. J. Hunter (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1990), 1288.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

maintenance of trust. They are ability, benevolence, and integrity.²¹⁰ Ability and integrity are two characteristics that trusting in another person can be grounded in. Because these two characteristics are likely to be influential early in a relationship, people need to focus on practicing them. First, the characteristic of *ability* refers to an assessment of the other's knowledge, intelligence, mental or physical skills, or experiences. This dimension recognizes that trust requires some sense that each individual is more willing to trust those who are able to perform in a manner that meets one's expectations.²¹¹ Therefore, living in a community, members try to learn as much as they can in order to add value to their community. As the master distributed his wealth among three servants, apportioned to them on the basis of their abilities, so "[God] gave some as apostles, others as prophets, others as evangelists, others as pastors and teachers, to equip the holy ones for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ (Eph 4:11-12)." Second, the characteristic of *integrity* is the degree to which the community's member has the quality of being honest and of high moral principles that are acceptable to other people. Authenticity is mentioned as one of the keys to being trusted. This dimension by which outside appearances correspond with interior life leads to trust based on consistency in past actions, credibility of communication through always telling the truth, a strong sense of justice, and commitment to standards of fairness as well as treating everyone equally.²¹² The observational sign that the community's members will see is the congruence of the other's word and deed, and then they will grow in respect

²¹⁰ Roger C. Mayer, James H. Davis, and F. David Schoorman, "An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust," *Academy of Management Review* 20, no. 3, (1995): 717.

²¹¹ Ibid. 718.

²¹² Ibid., 719.

and trust. Jesus Christ said: “The person who is trustworthy in very small matters is also trustworthy in great ones; and the person who is dishonest in very small matters is also dishonest in great ones (Lk 16:10).”

When trust relationships go smoothly, benevolence will emerge. Benevolence is being understanding, compassionate, kind, generous, helpful and loving for other members. Such generosity suggests that the trustee would put community goals ahead of individual goals, and show all other members in the community that they have the others’ welfare at heart.²¹³ Benevolence is also what St. Paul called the members of the church of Colossae to display in their new life with Christ, the virtues that are appropriate to be God’s chosen, holy people:

“Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another; as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection. And let the peace of Christ control your hearts, the peace into which you were also called in one body (Col 3:12-15).”

Following St. Paul’s words, people in the community would treat each other like family members. The closer the relationship between individuals grows, the more the effect of benevolence will increase.

(iii) Attentive Listening:

One of the techniques that helps people to understand another is the art of listening, really listening with their hearts. This is among the most important qualities for a healthy community. From general meetings and face-to-face discussions, to

²¹³ Ibid.

opportunities for learning and to various and subtle interactions with one another, a good listener can make the difference in a community. This is also a necessary skill for seminarians preparing themselves for the ministerial priesthood.

Every community in this world is made up of human beings who are imperfect. As a human being, everyone has limitations and inadequacies which lead to mistakes. Therefore, each person requires enormous amounts of grace to have the strength and integrity to cope with these mistakes and repair them. When people in community have the courage to tell someone about something corrective or to offer valuable advice, community members must realize that they need to receive from others, and then step up and have the courage to listen. In other words, they need to learn the art of listening with humility. As Mother Mary Francis, P.C.C. wrote: “To listen requires humility, for the thesis basic to listening is that others may quite possibly have something of value to say, something from which we can profit. It presupposes a belief that I have not cornered the market on ideas. It retires me from the rostrum to the student assembly.”²¹⁴

In order to really listen to someone, people also need to listen with their minds and hearts; therefore, a loving, nonjudgmental attitude is really necessary. They need to practice seeing the best in the speaker rather than being judgmental or focused on their shortcomings. This will increase the listeners’ empathy level and help them to be fair in their assessment. They need to make sure they can both hear them and make sense of what they are saying. How are they able to listen to the true feelings of persons who are in front of them and share with them not only through their words, but more important through

²¹⁴ Mother Mary Francis, *Chastity, Poverty, and Obedience* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 24.

body language, facial expressions, and consistency between words and behaviors? It really is an art! And like all other kinds of art, it requires not merely a natural aptitude, but also understanding and practice. The more they are able to read the sub-text and the true feelings of a person, the more they can demonstrate their concerns and compassion effectively, and so live up to their calling. They also focus on being present in the moment, and expressing their respectfulness for the speaker by maintaining good eye contact, providing a friendly smile, being courteous, and nodding when appropriate. In this active listening process, they avoid discourteous behaviors such as slumping in the chair, twiddling thumbs, looking at a watch, or sighing deeply during the conversation.

(iv) Clear Communication

For living in a community, effective communication is a major key to success, because it is the process by which information is exchanged between individuals in the community. This creates understanding through a common system of languages, symbols, signs, or behaviors. Communication is a two-way street that involves being able to talk to and listen to. Poor communication is a common reason for interpersonal conflicts. When people use verbal language to communicate, there is more involved than words. It involves not only the words one uses to transfer factual information to others, but also a variety of important messages that are sent and received through voice tone, body language, and a myriad of symbols. According to John Savage, communication is 55 percent body language, 38 percent tone of voice, and 7 percent the actual words

used.²¹⁵ Therefore, face-to-face communication is a means of encountering the mind, heart, and spirit of another.

Healthy community life needs individuals who are willing and able to speak well to place some of their ideas into the community arena for consideration. Sharing these ideas often entails risk because whatever they say is always open to misunderstanding. These individuals need to have courage, for they are not certain whether their ideas will be welcomed, attacked or ignored, but they undertake to express their thoughts or opinions honestly, to offer issues for community appraisal out of a sense of responsibility for the community. However, such sharing is a double-edged sword because although what they say can be motivated by good intentions, it might in fact be inadequate or incorrect. In addition, their messages could contain negative personal information about another that hurts someone or makes others angry or uncomfortable. Hence for clear and effective communication, the sender must determine the purpose of the communication and use words which have the same meaning for sender and receiver. Speaking at a moderate rate is not only more intelligible to the receiver; it can also communicate self-confidence, knowledge, and experience so that the sender has more influence with his ideas. On the other hand, receivers need to verify that the message they mean to send is actually received and interpreted the way the sender intended. The only way that the senders can be sure their hearers have understood clearly is to listen to the people they communicate with. To ensure this they should make a special effort to encourage their hearers to give feedback: what they have heard and what they have made of it.

²¹⁵ John Savage, *Listening & Caring Skills: A Guide for Groups and Leaders* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 16.

When living in a community, it is tempting to avoid telling the truth, especially if that truth might be painful for someone, or to speak less than the truth to others because people do not want to hurt or offend them. Moreover, members might be also tempted to shade the truth about themselves because they want others to see them in as good a light as they possibly can. Speaking the truth is such a complicated individual process that no person can possibly understand what the outcome should be ahead of time for their community. At the same time, each member in community has a responsibility to build up the community in healthy growth; therefore one needs to live in the truth and to have courage to speak the truth. As Jesus said: “If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (Jn 8:31-32).”

How can members of a community speak the truth, even when these words may bring pain? Even if the words hurt, are they spoken lovingly? For speaking the truth can be done without love, and as a result can weaken the community bond as well as the relationship between individual members. An important aspect of communication, therefore, is not simply the decision to speak or not to speak, but to do so or not to do so in light of the command to love one another as Jesus lived it out: “Love one another as I love you (Jn 15: 12).” St. Augustine said in his homily on the First Epistle of John: “It is impossible to know in every circumstance exactly what should be done: to speak or to be silent, to correct or to let things go. Here is a rule that is valid for all cases: ‘Love and do what you will.’”²¹⁶ The most important key to speaking the truth in love is speaking with respect, gentleness, and kindness – maintaining the other person’s dignity (cf. Jb 42:7-9;

²¹⁶ Raniero Cantalamessa, *On Curing Our Deafness*, Zenit Online, September 14, 2006, <<http://www.zenit.org/article-16924?l=english>> (May 5, 2011)

Eph 4:25-32). What each member must be concerned about are: how much he loves his community, and whether he is placing the welfare of the community above his own welfare? If a member speaks, it should be out of love, if a member is silent, it should be out of love, and out of love usually comes good.

(v) Knowing and Being Who You Are

Each person is a unique creation of God and therefore people really need to accept each other's differences. No two people have the exact same life, even if they are identical twins. They may look alike and share similarities, but the individual experience of the life for each person is unique. Each person is a different individual, and no one likes being isolated. Everyone needs to belong, to be a part of and contained within something larger than the individual self. Thus people make up and take care of the community, follow its identity and share each other's values. Although there may be common beliefs spread among the members of a seminary, the exact conditions of when, where, and under what circumstances each individual may choose to commit his life to a priestly vocation are quite unique. Living together in the community where there is a place of belonging can make the members begin to look, think, and act alike²¹⁷. Thus there is a risk of reducing the richness of personal conscience and uniqueness in the name of such values as unity, efficiency, and even the community identity. At the same time, "belonging is for becoming", because "community is for growth of the personal consciousness and freedom" of each member.²¹⁸ Joining the community, each person looks for growth and greater maturity. The issue is how each member can live in the

²¹⁷ The idea of belonging to community is discussed and developed by Jean Vanier, in *Community and Growth*

²¹⁸ Jean Vanier, *Community and Growth*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 22.

spiritual way of the religious community without losing his identity. Therefore, facing the choice of doing this or doing that, the question each member needs to ask is: “Am I trying to please God or the others in the community?” Remember that: “The ways of God for the individual are not always those of the people at the head of the community or what human reason and experience establish.”²¹⁹ So, a mature discernment and wisdom must be focused on God first, while also being aware of the good of others.

A beautiful flower garden is not composed of only one kind of flower, but is composed of a wide variety of precious, unique, and rare flowers. A dynamic community is a group that has individual differences. Excessive walls, barriers, or boundaries which inhibit collaboration only lead to chaos, division, and fracture. Having no boundaries is also dysfunctional like weeds in a garden encroaching upon the flowers. Differences make the community richer, more diverse, and vibrant. People do not want to live in a community with persons who are too much alike. Each member is a beautiful flower in God’s garden – unique, different, gifted, talented, and limited. In communion with others, they make a beautiful garden which manifests a small part of the rich glory of God. In Paul’s words, “As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended. If they were all one part, where would the body be? But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body (1 Cor 12: 14, 18-20).” By serving others in their ministry activities, each member has a place and a function within the community and helps to create the abundance of the community.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

Each member needs the full conviction that he is loved, and that need will be satisfied through belonging. Belief that he is loved by God is a result of the deepening intimacy with God in prayer. This love is expressed through the fact that he has a sense of his own worth and of being loved in his community, in spite of his weakness. This helps him to develop a close relationship with the others, and thus facilitates his getting along with them because he does not need to show his worth to the community members through such maneuvers as persistent argument, overwork, or unhealthy competition. He also does not desire power to win, to beat others, or to prove his position of strength through influence. Indeed, by belonging and participating in activities in the community, he will grow to feel loved by others and the need to be loved will be satisfied. As a result, through participation in activities in which he shares his talents inside or outside of the community, he also becomes a needed part of the community. He develops an awareness of his position and his value in the community, as well as a humble awareness of his limits and weakness. In this way, his self-esteem can grow.

2. Practicing *Lectio Divina* in community life

Lectio divina can be practiced in a public or a private setting. As a prayerful activity of Christian community, it provides a time and place where each person can share his faith journey with others as they examine their lives together in light of the Scripture. The ambient light of Scriptures allows each individual both to see and be seen, to give and receive enlightenment. Pope Benedict XVI in his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini* wrote: “The Bible was written by the People of God for the People of

God, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (VD 30).”²²⁰ Therefore, in the process of *lectio divina*, “One must avoid the risk of an individualistic approach, and remember that God’s word is given to us precisely to build communion, to unite us in the Truth along our path to God. While it is a word addressed to each of us personally, it is also a word which builds community, which builds the Church (VD 86).”²²¹ On the one hand, people follow and respect the teaching of the Church. On the other hand, within these teachings there is often a nuance which inspires or guides one to a fuller participation in Christ. Therefore, praying *lectio divina* in the group, each member is open to hearing the perspective and insights of one another to enrich their spiritual life.

As in salvation history, God used the human voices of the prophets to speak words of comfort and confrontation, hope and direction to His people; God continues even today to deliver His message to the ones who open their ears to listen through those such as loved ones, co-workers, neighbors, or even strangers. Thus, practicing *lectio divina* in a small group prayerful reading of the Scripture creates the appropriate environment for listening to God’s voice. It is in this environment of a group that each person has the opportunity to share how God has blessed him. “It is powerful to experience God’s stillness and goodness in the context of a group.”²²² Indeed, the environment of the *lectio divina* group is not bible study, and so the group can never be satisfied with communicating information or looking for answers to biblical issues; it must be oriented toward personal transformation by sharing what insights each member has gotten from the word of God under the Holy Spirit. In the seminary, this practice

²²⁰ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 47.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 127.

²²² Christine Valters Paintner & Lucy Wynkoop, *Lectio Divina*, 77.

supports the development of each individual's vocation in congregational contexts, because in the Scripture the seminarians encounter the living Lord and He speaks to their hearts. By growing in their relationship with the Word of God, they necessarily grow in awareness of their vocation, responding to His love in their lives, "taking up tasks and ministries which help to build up the Church (VD 77)."²²³

Whether *lectio divina* is done in private or with groups, both forms use the process of praying *lectio divina* described in chapter II. However, to translate *lectio divina* into a group setting requires some adaption. In a group, there is needed a leader, a facilitator, to guide the process. The facilitator is not an expert in Scripture or in the process of *lectio divina*, but just a person having the simple human skills necessary to guide a group through several periods of silence and reflection without interruption of individual sharing. Therefore each member will take a turn in this role.²²⁴

Stephen J. Binz gave practical advice in the group process of *lectio divina*. In its public form it should never be a substitute for a regular, private form. "Rather, the communal experience should be a normal continuation of each member's daily sacred reading."²²⁵ The role of each member is very important in making this activity more alive for the group. The richness of the message of the Scripture will result from sharing with each other insights gained from their personal reflection. Therefore, spending private time daily with Scripture is preparatory to joining the prayer meeting in a fraternal bond, not in a conversation or discussion. Moreover, members need daily prayer on the Scripture text to sustain deep and abiding stillness and to discern action. Pope Benedict

²²³ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 115.

²²⁴ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 112.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

XVI summarized: “‘*viva lectio est vita bonorum.*’ The most profound interpretation of Scripture comes precisely from those who let themselves be shaped by the word of God through listening, reading and assiduous meditation (VD 48).”²²⁶ In the bond of community relationship, after practicing private meditation and with the desire and willingness to learn from one another, each member should strive to share his insights and experiences freely in a spirit of love. This is best if the pronoun “I” is used to express the words that come from his own mind and heart. Participants can also benefit greatly from the insights of others, because there is a power in God’s word that can profoundly change people’s lives. “For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down and do not return there till they have watered the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, giving seed to him who sows and bread to him who eats, so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth; it shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it (Is 55:10-11).” They are aware that “the teacher is the divine word; the members of the group are all learners.”²²⁷

As a result, with its own dynamics the group has social benefits in which the members grow together in faith, hope, and charity. Karl A. Schultz wrote: “The majority of our insights into *lectio divina* come through others, either directly or indirectly, and through providential life experiences discerned in the Spirit. The word of God is a community affair above all; even our individual time with God’s word must bear fruit in and be influenced by interactions with others.”²²⁸

²²⁶ Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 75.

²²⁷ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 111.

²²⁸ Karl A. Schultz, *How to Pray With the Bible: The Ancient Prayer Form of Lectio Divina Made Simple*, 125.

Cardinal Martini, who has experience doing *lectio divina* with thousands of youth, created the group method of *lectio divina*. “He incorporates Jesuit spirituality into a process modeled by the contemplative Benedictine and Trappist orders, reminding us that *lectio divina* is a universal model compatible with the various spiritualities within the church.”²²⁹

From the above mentioned chapter II, and from the practical experiences cited, some general guidelines for practicing *lectio divina* in a group setting may be conceptualized as follows:²³⁰

(i) Preparation: Arrange a place with prayerful environment so it is restful, comfortable, warm, and non-distracting. In the central place, an open Bible is placed on an ambo. In addition, this place may be enhanced by lighted candles and by some religious icon or images appropriate to the topic of that Scripture, because “a work of art (...) through the language of forms, color and sound, is able to manifest and make visible the human need to surpass the visible.”²³¹ Closed doors and drawn curtains and whatever makes one feel calm and at peace can be considered. Each member brings his own Bible. After the participants greet one another and each person chooses a place and a bodily posture conducive to prayer and reading, specifically with a “clean heart”, the facilitator invites the members to start with fifteen minutes of centering prayer. They can pray by reciting or chanting a psalm, or the “Our Father”, or other common prayers. They also

²²⁹ Karl A. Schultz, *Becoming Community* (Hyde Park: New City Press, 2007), 20.

²³⁰ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 113-16.

²³¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *General Audience* (August 31, 2011) <http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20110831_en.html> (September 7, 2011).

are encouraged to share something for which they would like the group to pray. The Holy Spirit is invoked that their minds, hearts, and spirits be open and receptive.

(ii) *Lectio* (reading): When the group has calmed their thoughts and is in a contemplative mode to turn their hearts to God, the facilitator opens the Bible, announces the previously chosen reading, normally the Sunday gospel, traces the Sign of the Cross on the Bible, kisses the Bible, and then proclaims the passage. During the speaker's reading, each member listens intently and personally reflects by trying to go deeper in understanding the reality the writer of the text intends to convey.

(iii) *Meditatio* (meditation): Following the proclamation is a brief period of silence during which the participants meditate on what they have heard and read. Then each member in turn shares a word or a phrase that struck him personally. Usually they then have a second person read it again in a different voice, to help the participants to envision it and listen for what the Holy Spirit seems to be revealing to them. They now want even deeper, spiritual meanings of the words that struck them, "because the word each person shared has enriched the passage for the others."²³²

(iv) *Oratio* (prayer): This is the affective prayer of the heart. The participants ask God for the grace to be changed by what they have read and heard, for them to come more fully into being what He wants them to be, and to help them apply this to their own lives.

²³² Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 115.

(v) *Contemplatio* (contemplation): The gospel passage is read a third time, moving into contemplative silence. The participants rest in gratitude for God, and let His Word sink into their spirits.

(vi) *Collatio* (discussion): Each member shares with the others what insights he has received, using “I” language. Sharing and listening help the participants to allow God’s message slowly resonate within them.²³³ Stephen J. Binz also provided a few warnings for the prayer group to remain faithful to the essential purpose of the sharing of God’s scriptural word: “First, the group can avoid the distraction of empty chatter and sentimentalism by sticking to the sacred text as it is experienced in the *lectio* and *meditatio*. Second, debate and dispute within the group erode its focus and purpose. Third, doctrinaire hairsplitting wears down the spirit of the group.”²³⁴

(vii) *Actio* (action): The last step is a final reading of the gospel passage. After listening, some members may pray with spontaneous prayer. Such prayer should be addressed directly to God. This *lectio divina* is closed with an extended time of silence, simply resting in the presence of God. It also may be concluded by a spoken prayer or a song. Then, leaving the meeting, they go back to daily activities. They are often encouraged by the social aspects of group interaction to live what they have been called to and invited to by God.

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ Ibid., 111.

CHAPTER IV

USING *LECTIO DIVINA* IN A SUPPORT GROUP FOR PRE-SEMINARIANS IN SAIGON ARCHDIOCESE IN VIETNAM

1. Introduction to the Project

The community activities within Saint Joseph Seminary (Saigon, Vietnam) have always been based on group organization. A class, which consists of about 60 seminarians, is divided into five groups. Each group has 12 persons chosen from different dioceses. These seminarians will remain in these small groups throughout their six-year formation.

Every two weeks on a Sunday morning, all five groups meet at different locations. This meeting is divided into two parts. The first part focuses on praying with the Gospel passage of this particular Sunday: each member shares his life experiences under the Bible's insights. This sharing is the fruit which comes from praying, with inspiration from God's living Word. Out of this sharing, the whole group then chooses to live out a Gospel challenge for the next two weeks. For the second part of the meeting, each member of the group has the opportunity to voice his opinion about the past activities of the group and of the whole seminary. This critique aims at fostering a sense of responsibility and interpersonal relationship on both an individual level and on a communal level. The seminarians may also make suggestions for future activities. At the end of the month, the representatives of each group, the president of the class, and the staff of seminary convene at a meeting to evaluate the community activities and address the seminarians' concerns.

Based on the group-organization mentioned above, this project offers an eight-week formation program called *Using Lectio Divina in A Support Group* to help the Saigon diocese's candidates in the process of preparing to join the seminary. In this project they practice the virtues of praying with the Gospel and sharing with the other members on community life.

(1) Participants: This project was offered to twenty candidates who lived at *the Saigon Archdiocesan Pastoral Institute* in Vietnam in the first semester (October 15, 2009 – February 5, 2010) of the one-year pre-seminary program. They were divided into three groups which took up the tasks necessary to community life, on a rotating basis.

(2) Structure and Time: This project consisted of an eight-week workshop; each session lasted for two hours (7:30 am – 9: 30 am).

Session	Contents
Preparation Session Oct. 20, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction of the facilitator and the participants - The required tools to be used in this project
First Session Oct. 27, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Traditional prayer forms in the Church's tradition - The importance of prayer in the process of priestly formation and priestly life
Second Session Nov. 3, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Introduction of <i>Lectio Divina</i> and how it applies to private prayer - Practicing <i>Lectio Divina</i> in private setting
Third Session Nov. 10, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The principles to apply <i>Lectio Divina</i> in a support group - Practicing Group <i>Lectio Divina</i> (I)
Fourth Session Nov. 17, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Practice: Listening as a critical skill in both prayer and community life
Fifth Session Nov. 24, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Practicing Group <i>Lectio Divina</i> (II)
Sixth Session Dec. 1, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The skills needed to live in community
Seventh Session Dec. 8, 2009	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The relationship between prayer life and community life - Practicing Group <i>Lectio Divina</i> (III)

Session	Contents
Eighth Session Dec. 15, 2009	- Evaluation

(3) Description of the Project: Bishop Peter Kham V. Nguyen, Auxiliary Bishop of the Saigon Diocese and director of *Archdiocesan Pastoral Institute* spoke about the need to train the pre-seminarians to develop a deeper prayer life and enrich their community life. I realized that the use of *lectio divina* by the pre-seminarians could address the Bishop's concerns. I prepared a proposal for this project and contacted Father Louis Tuan Anh Nguyen, director of the one-year pre-seminary program. He invited me to implement this project in order to help the current class of seminarian candidates.

The first session looks back at traditional prayer in Church history to show the importance of prayer in the process of priestly formation and priestly life. The second session explains what is meant by *Lectio Divina*, and its connection with contemplation in private prayer. How to practice *Lectio Divina* as a way of praying the Scripture and as a Group Exercise is described in the third session. The candidates then learn the art of listening as a critical skill for both prayer and community life, and they participate in small group praying using *Lectio Divina* for the next two weeks. The sixth session focuses on other skills needed to live in community. They have an opportunity to discuss and practice these skills in small groups in the seventh session and to learn the importance of having a balance between their prayer life and their active life. The participants are asked to evaluate this project in the final week's session.

During this project, a series of study questions were developed to guide and focus the participants reading. In addition, they were required to write a *Lectio Divina* journal for the duration of this project (at least one semester). They were aware that they would have to share their written reflections with the project director. The intention was that the participants would demonstrate a growth in their prayer life and in their relationship to God. Moreover, it is hoped that listening to others share in the group will help increase their compassion toward one another as well as provide a basis for greater harmony in the group. They were encouraged to continue writing in their journals after this project is been completed.

2. Preparation Step

The first meeting on October 20, 2009 was to inform the participants of the goals, format, methodology, and requirements of this project: a Bible containing commentary to help the reader to know about historical background or to explain the difficult details (always using the same published version), a journal diary, and other required books. Because these participants had met already for four years in the formation program of the vocation office and had been living in the *Archdiocesan Pastoral Institute* nearly three weeks, I had to use this meeting to get acquainted with them and to try to create an atmosphere of friendship and trust between them and me as well as among themselves. The three groups into which they had already been divided became the groups in this project.

The participants were invited to fill out the resumé and to write a resumé of their vocation journeys (See Index 1). When I asked “Have you practiced *lectio divina* in your prayer,” only two members, who had previously been in religious orders, answered that

they knew about *lectio divina* but indicated that they did not practice it regularly. The other 18 members knew nothing about the practice. Therefore, they were very excited to learn about this program.

Before the meeting ended, I distributed two required readings for the next session. Each group was assigned a chapter from the book *The Tradition of Catholic Prayer*, which is in English.²³⁵ Working in this way would improve their skills in reading English, one of the goals of pre-seminary formation. Group 1 was assigned the first chapter “Prayer in the Old Testament”, Group 2 was assigned the second chapter “New Testament Boldness”, and Group 3 was assigned the third chapter “Private Prayer in the Early Christian Centuries.” The first assignment had two goals: to help them discover the tradition of prayer throughout Church history and to give them the chance to strengthen fraternity through helping each other to understand the readings. After studying together in the group and then discussing their insights, they would choose a presenter to summarize the readings. For the second assignment, each member was required to read the Catechism of the Catholic Church from 2700 - 2724 to know about the three traditional expressions of prayer in the Catholic Church.

3. First Session: Forms of traditional prayer in the Church’s tradition and the importance of prayer in the process of priestly formation and priestly life.

Part A of this first session (October 27, 2009) dealt with the forms of traditional prayer in the Church. The presenter of each group gave a five minute overview of the required reading: a summary of prayers from the Old Testament, the New Testament, and

²³⁵ Christian Raab, O.S.B. and Harry Hagan, O.S.B., eds., *The Tradition of Catholic Prayer*.

the early Christian Centuries. I gave feedback, stressing important ideas such as the significance of the Book of Psalms as a formulary of prayers from the Old Testament and some examples of Jesus Christ and of Saint Paul as models of prayer in the New Testament.

I used a PowerPoint presentation with several significant historical figures to show the tradition of monastic prayer. Evagrius of Pontus said: “Prayer is not just thinking and feeling. Prayer is the way that we meet the transcendent God whom we are to worship in Spirit and in Truth.”²³⁶ John Cassian “makes love the goal of the Christian journey. Prayer plays an essential role in bringing the Christian to the love which unites a person to God.”²³⁷ St. John Climacus (ca. 570 – ca. 649) instructed his readers “how one progresses toward the climax of perfect prayer” in his book *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, described as “the most important nonscriptural spiritual text in the Eastern Orthodox Church.”²³⁸ With the development of monasticism in the Middle Ages, this spiritual life attracted many medieval Christians to the lifestyle of the monastery, where people were living a common life of prayer and work. In such situations, the Rule of St. Benedict was often a magnetic needle for the monks and nuns, for whom the two most important forms of prayer life were “the private prayer of *lectio divina* and the public prayer of the liturgy.”²³⁹

²³⁶ Ibid., 54.

²³⁷ Ibid., 55.

²³⁸ Ibid., 60.

²³⁹ Ibid., 77.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the two traditions that “have had an enormous impact on the history of Christian prayer”²⁴⁰ were the Franciscan Order and the Dominican Order. Both were officially recognized by the Church. According to St. Francis and the friars, “God could be known and loved in one’s friends and family, in natural beauty, in listening to a fine piece of music or reading poetry, or in many other encounters with his creation. Opening eyes and ears to the world became a way of praying, a way of encountering God!”²⁴¹ St. Dominic left an example of prayer by nine positions of the body such as kneeling, standing upright with outstretched arms, bowing, lying prostrate, and walking. In other words, “Christ, by becoming man, had sanctified the body” and so people “used the body to pray.”²⁴² St. Dominic and his followers were called the “Order of Preachers,” and they greatly influenced spiritual life. Examples of their contributions to the spiritual life are their special devotion to the Eucharist, their emphasis on integrating contemplation and action, and their Marian devotion, especially the prayer of the rosary.²⁴³

After the Reformation, the Catholic Church focused on the importance of the imagination in the development of the spiritual life, because with “imagination individuals could develop more intense, personal relationships with the Divine” within the context of the Church, community life, teaching, and sacramental worship.²⁴⁴ In the

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 80.

²⁴¹ Ibid., 84.

²⁴² Ibid., 85.

²⁴³ Ibid., 85-86.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 104.

modern era, prayer “has been marked by a focus on the significance of prayer in the life of ordinary Christians everywhere.”²⁴⁵

I also presented the three major expressions of prayer as vocal prayer, meditative prayer, and contemplative prayer (CCC 2721), and distinguished among them. There are some key differences²⁴⁶:

Vocal Prayer	Meditative Prayer	Contemplative Prayer
Reciting the words of already written prayers, either silently or aloud	Lifting the heart and the mind to God through focused reflection on the Creator God’s amazing actions and His wonderful providence	Contemplating in order to receive God’s lifting of the soul into himself (God’s work of embrace), so that it effortlessly basks in the divine light.
Uniting their hearts’ intention to the meaning of the praying words of the prayers that they recite.	The lips are quiet and the minds are active with the actions of the intellect, the imagination, the memory, and the emotions.	The lips and mind come to rest and the heart reaches out to be one with God, in blissful acceptance of the Divine embrace.
Discussing under the Holy Spirit in a focused community can constitute prayerful activity by sharing personal insights, moving the brotherhood to greater receptivity to God	Meditating, though aided by God and predicated upon the grace and work of Christ, is the result of people seeking Him.	Contemplating, in the strictest sense, is purely the work of God, but most often requires our readiness and preparation.
The very act of uttering one’s experience of a text gives it a kind of realization that can illuminate and lead to enhanced meditation and contemplation.	Meditative prayer can be mostly <i>discursive</i> or mostly <i>affective</i> .	Contemplating actually goes to a new level: lifting the soul briefly out of itself and into the divine.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 126.

²⁴⁶ <<http://rcspiritualdirection.com/blog/tags/contemplation>>

In part B, we discussed the importance of prayer in the process of priestly formation as well as in the priestly life. I used the images of nerves as necessary to the body, water as necessary to the plants, solid foundations as necessary to a building, and prayer as equally necessary to the spiritual life of priests. I asked the participants “How many hours do you set aside for formal prayer (both private and community prayer) in a day?” A majority answered about two hours, most of which was community prayer. Compared with twenty-four hours for the whole day, this is not enough for seminarians. Participants became aware of the need to be faithful to their schedule of prayer and to allot more time for private prayer. At the end of this session, I handed out evaluation forms that they would return to me after three days, with these questions:

- (1) What did you learn during this session that you did not know before?
- (2) Prayer is necessary in your life: Please share one of your own experiences about this.
- (3) In the three major forms of prayer, what type of prayer seemed most appealing to you?
- (4) What new insights came to you through learning about the techniques of *lectio divina* prayer?

4. Second Session: Introduction of *Lectio Divina* and its use in private prayer (November 3rd, 2009)

The opening prayer was two minutes of silence hearing a sung version of *Footprints in The Sand* by Thanh Tam, and viewing slides photographed by the facilitator to accompany the song. The participants felt deeply the need to be close to God in prayer. To realize this, I introduced them to *lectio divina* as a method of praying. In

twenty minutes I gave them a historical overview of *lectio divina*. I told them about the traditional four-step method that was presented by Guigo II in *The Ladder of Monks*. According to him, “these four [steps] are all rooted in reading sacred Scripture and are intimately connected. The [steps] are influenced by one another, and together they form a single development of the soul.”²⁴⁷ Over time, *collatio* (the sharing of personal insights) was added to the practice of *lectio divina* in community. Moreover, before starting the *lectio*, a preparation time to pray with the Holy Spirit became recognized as very necessary. This preparation time helped people as they prayed with God’s word to actualize the mature fruit of meditation by *actio* – living out what they learned through *lectio divina*.

After that, I introduced a guide for private practice of *lectio divina*. I requested that participants prepare the daily Gospel before they go to bed, and in the meditation thirty minutes before morning mass, they were to do the four steps of *lectio divina*. After mass, they wrote a daily journal of their reflections on the *lectio*. I provided guidance and practical examples of journaling with Scripture, and stressed to them paying attention to the following elements:

Lectio: The word or phrase of the biblical text that caught your attention or “spoke to you,” and why.

Meditatio: after meditating and thinking on the word or phrase that caught your attention, write down some of your meditation: emotions, questions, concerns, life parallels and applications, related biblical text, and personal memories evoked.

²⁴⁷ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 44.

Oratio: Ask God why this word caught your attention. What is He trying to say to you? Write out some of your dialogue with God about what you are feeling or hearing.

Contemplatio: Insights and lessons you derive, and the prayer you most need to pray.

Actio: The response that the Word and the Spirit evokes in you, including resolutions, actions, or attitude adjustments you feel called to undertake.²⁴⁸ And, when undertaken, these become *actio*.

In the second part of this session the participants practiced in private and wrote a journal, using *lectio divina* based on the Gospel passage describing the call of the first disciples (Matthew 4: 18-22). After 50 minutes, they handed in this paper. I also used these papers as part of the evaluation of the progress of the project.

5. Third Session: The principles to apply *Lectio Divina* in a support group (November 10th, 2009)

The opening prayer that was chosen by group one was the hymn, “Come, Holy Spirit.” This was in order to help the class be ready to listen to God’s word. Then, I proclaimed the gospel of Matthew 18:19-20: “Again, I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father. For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” In the spirit of this gospel, I stressed the importance of prayer in community life, and I moved on to teach them about the general guidelines for practicing *lectio divina* in a group setting, as mentioned earlier in chapter III.

²⁴⁸ Karl A. Schultz, *How to Pray With the Bible: The Ancient Prayer Form of Lectio Divina Made Simple*, 89.

I also gave them Binz's practical advice: "The collation should never take the place of regular, personal *lectio divina*."²⁴⁹ *Nemo dat quod non habet* – No one gives what he does not have. The participants gain their own personal insights and realizations by faithfully doing *lectio divina* daily; and they are able to bring some reflections to the group experience and to share these with one another. Moreover, God's word is a living word, and in the activity of the Holy Spirit, there are often brand new insights, or deeper understanding among the members of the group. Hearing them shared, the others would be enlightened and informed. This facility in *lectio* requires more practice than the twice a month group *lectio* provides. Therefore while "each must have a desire and willingness to learn from one another and to grow together in faith, hope, and charity,"²⁵⁰ the willingness includes the discipline of private daily *lectio*. Other disciplines fell to the group facilitators, a role that was shared by turns:

- Assuring members that each one is welcome;
- Guiding the group through each phase of the *collatio*;
- Helping keep the group focused on the Scripture;
- Ensuring that everyone is able to speak and share insights;
- Keeping the group from getting bogged down in dispute;
- Helping members believe that their contribution is important to the whole;
- Keeping time so that the group keeps moving through each phase and ends on time;
- Praying for the welfare of each member of the group.²⁵¹

After taking break time, the participants assembled in their groups in different rooms, and the facilitators led the *lectio divina* praying the gospel of Luke for that day:

²⁴⁹ Stephen J. Binz, *Conversing with God in Scripture*, 110.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 111.

²⁵¹ Ibid., 112.

Jesus said to his disciples, “Who among you would say to your servant coming in from the fields after plowing or tending sheep: ‘Come at once and sit down at table’? No, you tell him: ‘Prepare my dinner. Put on your apron and wait on me while I eat and drink; you can eat and drink afterwards.’ Do you thank this servant for doing what you commanded? So for you. When you have done all that you have been told to do, you must say: ‘We are no more than servants; we have only done our duty (17:7-10).’”

The participants had used this gospel passage in their private morning reflection. Following the guidelines for practicing *lectio divina* in a group setting, the group easily moved on in this practical process. I observed three groups, and had some feedback for them: Some participants used “we” instead of “I” when they shared their insights or experiences, making them less personal. Some of them were tempted to be moralistic; prescriptively using “must” rather than sharing their own personal experience. Some of them had a tendency to explain the Scripture instead of the fruitful insights they got in praying. Some talked so much that the others did not have enough time to share, and just sat quietly. While one was sharing, others continued reading the gospel, preparing to talk next, or being otherwise distracted. Because the members did not have skill in listening and sharing, the environment did not seem warm and friendly.

Responding to this last feedback, I introduced the main idea for the next session: Listening as a critical skill in both prayer and community life. I also encouraged the participants to practice private *lectio divina* in the reflection time every day, and to write their journals. I would read their journals as a part of evaluation this project.

6. Fourth Session: Listening as a critical skill for both prayer and community life

The group number two started this session (November 17th, 2009) with an opening prayer and the song *Listening to God's Words* by Nguyen Duy. From the main point of this song, I offered the participants a text on the importance of listening from the Scriptures: "The wise by hearing them will advance in learning, the intelligent will gain sound guidance (Prv 5:1)," and "Know this, my dear brothers: everyone should be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath (Jas 1:9)." The Greek philosopher, Zeno of Citium, said: "We have been given two ears and but a single mouth, in order that we may hear more and talk less."²⁵²

Even in our times, Jesus Christ, God's Word, continues to work in the Church and in the world through the power of the Holy Spirit acting in many different ways and giving many different gifts. Besides God's voice in private prayer time, at different times in life God's message is often incarnated through the words, example, and support of different members of the community. In other words, each person is an instrument of God, bringing God's message to others in community life. Therefore, in addition to learning to listen to God's message in prayer, it is very necessary to listen to others.

I explained the Chinese character for the verb "to listen" which is compounded from the ideogram for ears + eyes + undivided attention + open heart.²⁵³ Therefore, listening is an action in which people use their whole bodies: not only using their physical eyes and ears, but also metaphorically with their open hearts, as well as their undivided attention. I introduced five different ways to receive information identified by

²⁵² Ronald B. Adler, and Russell F. Proctor II, *Looking Out/ Looking In*, 12th ed. (Boston:Wadsworth, 2006), 246.

²⁵³ Ibid. 247.

John Savage in his book *Listening & Caring Skills: A Guide for Groups and Leaders* in which he suggested “communication in healthy relationships is open and direct.”²⁵⁴ In the communication process, the listener tries to respond to four things that are inside the sender of the communication when his message is sent: feelings, intentions, attitudes, and thoughts.²⁵⁵ Because there are many times the listener infers something different from what the speaker intends, the issue is that there is always a potential gap in interpersonal communication. Therefore, the listener needs to give feedback to the speaker.

I used Savage’s method “In-depth Listening Skills” to help the participants to learn the feedback skills to correct possible misunderstanding in communication with others. These listening skills are (1) Paraphrasing, (2) Productive Questions, (3) Perception Check, (4) Expression of Feeling and Emotions, (5) Fogging, (6) Negative Inquiry, and (7) Behavior Description. I defined each skill, explained it, gave some background about its usefulness and application, and performed the skill in a case study. Due to the weather situation in Vietnam, people do not experience fog. Therefore, I used the term “Rolling with the Punch”²⁵⁶ to replace the term “Fogging.”

This session ran an extra fifteen minutes, due to more material than could be treated in the allotted time. The participants were very excited to learn these skills because although they had experienced them, now they could name and systematize them. This helped them to get a deeper knowledge about these skills. The explanations

²⁵⁴ John Savage, *Listening & Caring Skills: A Guide for Groups and Leaders*, 11. According to Savage, there are five styles of communication: Direct and Open Feedback, Open but partial communication, Distorted full information, Distorted and deleted information, and Nonverbal Communication.

²⁵⁵ John Savage, *Listening & Caring Skills: A Guide for Groups and Leaders*, 16.

²⁵⁶ If someone punches you, you move a little and do not get so defensive. There is a back and forth, rather than a direct confrontation. We give and take a little, rather than insisting that we are right.

created a desire in the participants to become proficient in the skills. I also showed the connection between these skills and the communication process. They recognized the benefits derived from these skills in the present community life as well as in the life of their future ministry. The following homework was given to the participants as an evaluation for this session:

This week attend to what is really being said. Think about two or three interactions this week which may leave you wondering what is really being said: What happened? What was said? What was not said? What is your guess about what really is going on in these circumstances? What clues do you have about what was really meant?

7. Fifth Session: Practicing *Lectio Divina* (II)

Group number three prepared the opening prayer for this session (November 24th, 2009) with the song clip of *You Raise Me Up*. The first half of the session was devoted to practicing the seven listening skills that were taught last week. I gave the participants examples of these skills: I described each situation and what was said; the participants identified which skill was used in that context, and gave responses appropriate for that skill. Each group presented its answers to help their classmates understand the skills' usefulness and how they might apply these skills in their lives. They felt comfortable and confident enough to give feedback to each other and to discuss it in these activity situations. I helped them understand these skills so that they would be able to use them in actual situations.

In the second half of this session, the participants came back to their groups to practice *lectio divina*. They used the John (18:33b-37) which had been the reading on Sunday of Christ the King. I joined one of the groups to pray with them and to observe

their practice. They followed up on the outline of the *lectio divina* that they had studied. Learning from the last feedback, they avoided mistakes such as using “We” instead of “I” or “Must” instead of “desire to”. The environment of group sharing was warm, confident, fraternal, and not merely conversational or discursive. At the end of this session, I gave them some questions about their experiences: “What new insights and experiences did you get in doing *lectio divina* in small group? What difficulties were encountered in the process doing *lectio divina* in your group?” I also gave them a sign-up sheet for a 30 minute private meeting with me for spiritual direction during the next week. I reviewed their daily journals, discussed their vocation questions, and received private feedback from each.

8. Sixth Session: The skills to live in community life (December 1st, 2009)

As the opening prayer, I used the letter to the Philippians (2:1-11) about the admonition to like-mindedness and unity. The participants read together the hymn (2:6-11). After the opening prayer, I started this session with the experience which Bishop Vianney Fernando, Sri Lanka, described in his talk at the Bishops’ Seminar organized by the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences (FABC) – Office of Clergy.

Many years ago, when I was Vicar General, my predecessor received a letter from a Religious Major Superior recommending a young scholastic of their Congregation to the Diocesan Priesthood. The Major Superior’s letter stated that the scholastic was a talented young man but that they discovered that the young man was not a Community person, namely that he could not relate to any Religious Community where he was placed. But the Major Superior stated in his letter that he could be a good Diocesan Priest, as he does not have to live in a Community. My predecessor, the good holy man that he was, could not see the fallacy of this argument, and so he accepted the scholastic into the Diocese and ordained him. My poor predecessor had to pay the price of his mistake. From the word “go” it was disaster as the young Priest could not relate to

anyone for a sustained period of time and would “rub” everyone on the wrong side.

“The Priesthood is radically communitarian. Therefore, of special importance is the capacity of the Priest to relate to others. This is totally fundamental for a person who is called to be responsible for a community and to be a man of communion” (*PDV*: Pope John Paul II, 1992). It is my experience of 24 years, as a Bishop, that a substantial amount of a Bishop’s time and energies are expended in ironing out relational problems caused by his Priests – either with the Bishop or among themselves or with the people and not uncommonly with Religious working in the Parish.²⁵⁷

I also gave some quotes from Catholic teaching about the importance of community life in priestly formation. I raised the question to the participants: “According to you, to be in harmony with your community life, what virtue do you need to improve or skill do you need to practice?” After two minutes, their answers were collected. The results showed their concerns about the virtues of humility, compassion, patience, self-knowledge, acceptance of the differences among others, non-selfishness, non-judgment, working hard, the concern for others and a sense of humor. Then, I connected their answers to the five skills to improve their behaviors in community life that I would teach this session. They were (i) Praying to see Christ’s image in all people, (ii) Earning and Extending Trust, (iii) Attentive Listening, (iv) Clear Communication, and (v) Knowing and Being Who You Are; these were described in Chapter III. I used the Socratic method to talk about these skills with examples. The participants participated actively by sharing their ideas as well as their experiences, and so did not get bored or lose concentration. This session excited participants’ curiosity and aroused their

²⁵⁷ FABC Papers, *Seminar for Bishops of Asia Caring for Priests – Especially for Those with Difficulties*, No.122

interest because they had not yet realized that they needed to learn more about living in community. They thought that living in a community was a natural endowment for everybody, with only some variation between individuals. Now, they were aware of the need to practice these skills, as well as sometimes to change their individual life style to agree with community life. I gave them a questionnaire asking for self-ratings of these skills, using a scale from 0 to 5. I requested that they read the Gospels and look for how Jesus Christ displayed these five skills in community life, as the homework and as a spiritual reflection during this week. To prepare for the next discussion session, I gave them this question to ponder: “What is the connection between prayer life and community life, what are the benefits, and what are the problems you have in this area?”

9. Seventh Session: The relationship between prayer life and community life (December 8th, 2009)

This was the feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

The opening prayer was the gospel passage in which Mary visited Elizabeth (Lk 1: 39-45). This was used to continue the gospel passage which had been read in the morning Mass. The Lord is already with Mary at every moment through the fullness of her prayer life (Lk 1:28). This same Mary had set out and traveled to visit her relatives to share joy, happiness, and peace. I used this image of Mary to introduce the topic of this session: The relationship between prayer life and community life.

In the first half of this session, I used the discussion method in small groups to help the participants think about the connection between prayer life and community life. I asked what benefits they received and what problems they had. After discussing, the presenter of each group summarized the members' ideas as follows:

Prayer life and community life are truly integrated. Christian prayer, both communal and private, always prays with Christ, because through our vocation in Baptism, we are joined to Jesus Christ by faith. We are all parts of the one body (cf. 1 Cor 12:12-13). Union with Christ is likewise communion with other members of Christ. Therefore, our prayer always has the dimension of community. That is the prayer of the whole Christ, Head and members. We meet Christ in our prayer, but we must expand this meeting to include community as the place of our encounter with Christ. One's prayer life must also be a vital one that comes out of our community life and expresses what we are endeavoring to do. Our behaviors and actions are based on our prayer and our interior life. In our prayer, we learn from God's word, and we compare what we do in community with what Jesus Christ's attitude and responses were with the other people around Him. In this way, we can recognize issues for us to correct or change. We also get the power from God to respond in love and gentleness to the negative actions of other people. The more our prayer life is healthy, the more the community life and the interior life will be closely intertwined. On the other hand, a community life of action without the deep undergirding of prayer leads many of us to burn-out.

During the second half of this session, I gave them some feedback about the abundance of ideas in their discussion. Then, I stressed that the greater the emphasis on prayer life, the better the fraternity in community life. As the homework, I offered the challenge of working together to prepare for Christmas. This planning included decorating the Christmas tree, setting up the Christmas Crèche, planning the Christmas liturgy, and preparing the Christmas party. This was an opportunity for them to practice

how to work together, to listen, to generate a diversity of ideas, to make better decisions, and to distribute the workload. Each person became invested, participated and got involved, while reinforcing each other's individual capabilities and talents. By signing the work-list, they made a commitment to finish their tasks. They learned to show a sense of responsibility. This was a new experience for them, because in the past they were simply assigned tasks from the authority.

10. Eighth Session: Evaluation

In the first half of this session (December 15th, 2009), I asked the participants to do a Final Evaluation (See Appendix 2). The details of their evaluation will be addressed in the following chapter. At the request of the director of the one-year pre-seminary program, I used the second half of this session to help the participants to review their planning for Christmas Day.

CHAPTER V

EVALUATION

Looking back on the process of doing the project, *Using Lectio Divina in A Support Group*, this chapter will address its effectiveness. I will evaluate myself as the facilitator, and then address the evaluation statements by the participants. All of this will provide insights for improvement from lessons learned in this first iteration of this use of *lectio divina*.

1. Self-evaluation

First, positive evaluations: From my Bishop's request as well as from my own experience as a seminarian, I am deeply aware of the importance and necessity for doing this project. I used knowledge from ministry courses that I had taken and various readings from my research to prepare this project. I also used educational technologies to support my teaching, for example a laptop, a projector, and music. The time was propitious, because the students were ready, the need was there, and the framework existed. The organization, schedule, and the environment were mutually beneficial for me to do my project. Moreover, the students were curious and very excited to learn something new from abroad. This was a benefit for me to do my project with them.

Secondly, there were some negative evaluations. One of the lessons learned dealt with facility space. There was only one classroom, and when small groups practiced *lectio divina*, they had to use the hallway and the activity room. Because the rooms were very close, the small groups distracted each other. It was very hard for the participants to concentrate. In the process of teaching, I used some English readings. This caused some

difficulties for the participants who knew English, but not always well enough to understand perfectly. In addition, for a long time I often did not use my national language, when I translated some perplexing English term or phrase. Using foreign documents on *lectio divina*, there were some gaps in understanding. I tried to adapt these concepts into the Vietnamese culture. The topic of listening skills was new for the participants, but I did not have enough time to give them adequate practice in using these skills. This project and my time to stay with the participants were only two months. Hence, I was not able to observe or to know about what happened after the participants finished this project.

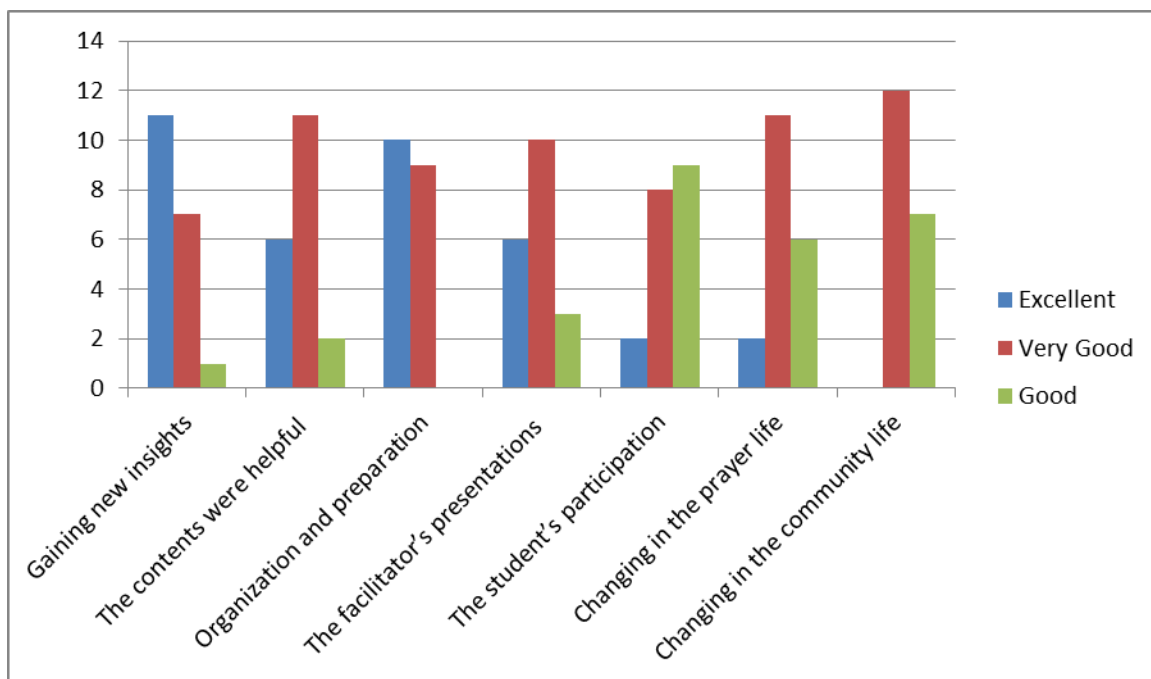
2. Evaluation statements of the participants:

Collecting the final evaluation from nineteen participants (one participant had to leave due to illness), the results are as follows:

(i) The participants were given the following request: “To evaluate the effectiveness of this project in your life, as well as providing more information for the facilitator, please respond to each of the following questions by circling the appropriate number.” The results are given below. There were no responses in the fair or poor categories.

- The training project helped the participants to gain new insights: 58% answered excellent, 37% very good, and 5% good.
- The contents of this project were helpful: 32% answered excellent, 58% very good, and 10% good

- Organization and preparation of the facilitator: 52% answered excellent, 48% very good.
- The manner of the facilitator's presentations: 32% answered excellent, 52% very good, and 16% good
- The student's participation: 10% answered excellent, 42% very good, and 48% good
- The change in my prayer life: 10% answered excellent, 58% very good, and 32% good
- The change in community life: none answered excellent, 63% very good, and 37% good.



(ii) Please choose a session that you liked the best, and explain why you chose it?

Ten participants chose the series session “Introduction of *Lectio Divina* and how it applies to private prayer and to a support group,” because this topic met their needs in the activity of sharing Gospel in a small group. A representative sample of their comments follows:

- “I think *lectio divina* is very helpful to me in order to get a closer relationship to God, and then a closer relationship with the other members of the community. This is the first time I learned and practiced *lectio divina*. I will continue this prayer practice.”
- “I liked this *lectio divina* class because I easily understood your explanations, including the images in PowerPoint. Moreover, we then practiced in small group. This was a good chance for the members in small groups to share their experiences in prayer life and community life.”
- “This *lectio divina* class was very helpful because we learned the techniques and we practiced them during our daily prayer time and in small group. Because we easily understood it and we liked it, we remembered more of it.”
- “This was a new topic for me. I had heard about this practice, but I had not had a chance to participate in it. Fortunately, I participated in this program, and now I feel confident in private prayer as well as in sharing in a small group.”
- “This is the first time I had a chance to practice *lectio divina*. This was a very powerful experience.”
- “This topic not only helped me to pray, but it also helped me to understand and learn more about the Scriptures.”
- “I think *lectio divina* helped me to set a goal in my pre-seminary year of developing my inner life through prayer and community life.”

- “I heard the members sharing and I shared my spiritual experiences in *lectio divina*. These activities helped me to love the Bible and to get a deeper knowledge of it.”

Five participants chose the session: “The skills needed to live in community” as the session that they liked best. Their comments follow:

- “This session helped me to learn the skills needed to live compatibly together with others in the community. This started with the small group in seminary, and then hopefully will expand to the big community in the parish, or in the diocese. Community life is not easy. There are many differences among individuals. We tried to choose a common goal, and each person sacrificed himself for the general good. Through community life, I have had a chance to work hard on becoming more mature. Working together with other members in my community, we each brought different qualities, and we were all motivated by love and caring. In other words, we live in this community like in a family. Using these skills under the Holy Spirit’s guidance and the Scriptures’ light, we form ourselves to build up the solid connections of brotherhood, and get more experience in how to build a healthy community in future ministry.”
- “The interesting point in this session was to help me live better in my community. From prayer time to study time, and play time, all these activities also help us to know how to live in harmony with each other. This session offered a practical method for living together under the same roof. It was very powerful for me.”
- “This session helped me to get along with other members in the community so that my relationships became stronger. We are more understanding and more compassionate with each other. The result is that the more I have been able to become observant of the emotional feelings of others, the more I am able to be attentive to my emotional feelings. Now we more easily share our personal feelings with others, and this promotes trust.”

- “This session gave me what skills I needed. This topic offered me a practical view of what skills I need to practice in the process of formation in community life. Because the skill I most lacked was the skill I need in order to be fully myself, I set that skill as my goal. The homework of this session helped me to recognize Jesus as a model in living community, using these skills that I had studied.”
- “This session was helpful for me because it systematized the way we live in the community. I got comprehensive information on this topic. I try to practice and use what I learned in my daily life.”

Four participants liked the session: “Listening Skills” the most. Examples of their comments follow:

- “It helped me to know how to connect with others. Moreover, listening helps me to make a strong bond between the members in the community, and all of its fruits start to blossom, such as understanding of one another, empathy, forgiveness, loyalty and all the other qualities associated with the strong spirit of fraternity.”
- “This session helped me to be aware of my own imperfections and to be gentle with others. I learned to deeply understand what people meant when they talked to me, and more easily to show them compassion.”
- “This session was very helpful for human formation – one of the four different areas of formation of candidates for the priesthood. It helped me to get to know myself, and face up to my follies, mistakes, and imperfections. This was a chance to improve myself in becoming a more mature person, to correct my mistakes, and to strengthen my relationships with the others.”
- “I was often talking more than listening. Even when I was listening to someone, I was not paying enough attention to them. I just heard their words, misunderstanding or unmindful of their nonverbal communication. This was the first time I learned and

practiced these listening skills. I now use these skills for listening effectively to others. It also helps me to listen to God's message in my prayer time."

From the above comments, I concluded that the topics of this project were attractive to the participants and were beneficial in their own lives. Their evaluations showed that most of them needed to improve their prayer lives, some were lacking in the skills needed for community life, and some wanted to enhance their communication skills with others. They learned not only the theories, but also its real-life practice. Observing the participants in the class, I was impressed with their diligence in this entire project. It also prompted me to work hard in my teaching.

(iii) What additional ideas about the content of this training project could you suggest? What other topics that should be included? Please explain.

Most participants had the opinion that the content of this training project was quite intense. However there was one member asking about learning the skill to deal with stress and how to deal with conflicts in the group or in the community. These topics I had not addressed in this project. I hope in the future to be able to add stress and conflict management skills as topics in the project. The time allotted for this project proved not to be adequate. The evaluations also requested having more time to practice *lectio divina* under my supervision. The participants also indicated that it would be beneficial to have me participate more frequently in each small group. From this comment I deduced that it would be helpful to have a spiritual director as their companion on the spiritual journey as they practice *lectio divina*, at least in the first few months.

They also asked about using video clips in class to illustrate the contents of the “Listening Skill” session. This was a difficult issue for me, because these topics were new in Vietnam. I could not find Vietnamese clips to use, only some English clips. I did not have time to make these clips. This comment also reminded me about trying to improve my teaching skills to make the class environment more active and attractive to students. In addition, the participants desired more time to practice the listening skills, and more examples, stories or case studies for the session on skills for living in community. If I can address these suggestions, it would help them more easily to apply these skills in their lives.

They also offered the suggestions of an overnight retreat at the end of program. I considered this activity for them, but their schedule was very tight. We could not find a date for the retreat because every activity was set up in the beginning of the school year. I did not want to disturb their schedules. However, the Christmas Mass and party that I helped them to do was a powerful experience. They worked together, practiced songs, decorated the Christmas tree, set up the Christmas Crèche, prepared Christmas gifts, and cooked meals. These activities helped their brotherhood to develop. They had a chance to observe and care for each other, and to understand each other more deeply. They shared: “This is the first time we did not celebrate Christmas with our own family; however the Christmas environment and activities here made us feel warm and more than family. This is a wonderful Christmas night. We have never had a celebration like this before in our lives.”

(iv) Please share a good experience that you had in small group?

The participants shared their good experiences that they had in small group during the time they participated in this formation project:

- “My experience that I had in small group doing *lectio divina*: Each member shared what they got in private prayer time. There was no joking, backbiting, or chatting. We focused on Scriptures and God’s message that this is the Truth, the Life, and the Food we share together in the brotherhood bond. Therefore, the benefit of prayer time in *lectio divina* is very huge. I believe that if our community faithfully continues to do *lectio divina*, our community will be changed.”
- “The members of small group easily shared their difficulties, sadness, or happiness that they faced. We were open to each other. The relationship between the members became stronger by prayer, sharing, and caring.”
- “The most interesting point I have learned from this project is that we are committed to building up the brotherhood. Therefore, we used twenty minutes of free time after dinner to share what happened in our daily life with joys or sadness to pray for or to encourage each other, before chatting or joking. This activity draws each member closer to the others.”
- “In small group, I trust the others and I can share personal feelings with my brothers. I am very happy to live and study with them. I feel that community life is easier. I have experienced belong to this community. This is my second family.”
- “I got support from my brothers in small group. On my own, it is sometimes hard to see things clearly. But, when I shared with my brothers, they gave me advice and support, and I got the big picture and confidence to make a decision. Thank you very much for the support from my brothers.”
- “I believe that God used my brothers to remind me of something when I listened to them sharing in *lectio divina*. This also required

me to do my private prayer time more seriously, because I am also God's instrument for the others."

- "Although each person is different, in small group we have some common points such as the required characteristics for priestly vocation. Moreover, when we prayed, worked, studied, and played together, the relationship developed. Therefore, we can better trust and share with one another."
- "Compared to sharing of the Gospel before using *lectio divina*, it is now easier to share with my brothers here. We previously had so much silent time because few wanted to share. Now everyone is more ready to share, so *lectio divina* is more helpful and activates our brotherly sharing."
- "I recognized the honesty and desire for improvement in my brothers when I gave feedback to them as well as when I received feedback from them. This is a big change for me."
- "I learned a lot from *lectio divina* when listening to others sharing. Now I feel confident to talk with someone who needs encouragement. I also am more humble so I can receive the help of others. I hope that I also share with the others the best part of myself that I have in my prayer."
- "The point that touched me very powerfully is the activity of the Holy Spirit. We shared the same word, or phrase from the Scriptures, but each person had different ideas or experiences. This helps me to see the richness of God's words."
- "There are changes in my life, but not too much yet. I hope that in future, with *lectio divina* the sharing of the Scriptures will blossom in our lives."

From these comments, I judge that the participants worked very seriously. The more they devoted part of their daily prayer time to seeking God's guidance, the more

they became better listeners to the Holy Spirit and the more God's grace flowed out to them and to other members. Therefore the result they got is the fruits of their work with the Holy Spirit. This is very important in the process of discernment of their priestly vocations.

(v) What factors helped to develop the fraternity and cooperation needed for community life while focusing on God's word?

From the participants' comments, I summarized the following factors as helping to develop the fraternity and cooperation for community life while focusing on God's word:

- Practicing seriously *lectio divina* in private each day and in small group each week (However, this suggestion of weekly small groups was not feasible, because there was room in the schedule only for twice per month).
- Doing *lectio divina*, each person received different insights from God's word, but all these were considered gifts from God. One person's insight may be helpful for someone else at a later time. This is one contribution to improved fraternity and cooperation in community life.
- Integrating prayer life and community life: prayer before working, prayer during working, and prayer after working. We were able to use the Gospel as a lodestar for our lives.
- Subordinating the self to Gospel values to reject "selfishness" and to practice "selflessness", to forgive others more readily, and to live out the "Our Father."

- Learning the skills needed to listen to God's word and to the brothers in community.
- Having a humble attitude to recognize that there are still areas in my life that need to be conquered, and attitudes that need to be corrected, with the help of others. And vice versa, each person readily helps the others with a loving and candid heart.
- Trying to observe the other's needs with more compassion, especially spiritual or emotional needs.
- Creating a warm and joyful environment doing *lectio divina* in small groups. This can provide the energy to attract others to love this activity.
- Remembering and praying for the members of the community, especially when they are in need.
- Living in the truth because Jesus spoke: "If you remain in my word, you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free (John 8:31-32)."
- Keeping honest in order to build up trust in the relationship between each member of the community.
- Keeping the rule: "Listening more than talking".
- Doing for someone else what I would like somebody to do for me.
Volunteering to do the hard work.
- Not judging others, thinking of and looking at the others with a positive view, giving the others smiles.

- Having my actions reflect my words, as in the proverb, “Don’t listen to what they say but look at what they’ve done.”
- Respecting the privacy of others, and building up healthy boundaries between personal life and community life. A sense of privacy at some times and the openness to sharing at other times are both important.
- Faithfully making time for private prayer, fundamental factor to maintain *lectio divina* in small group and to develop fraternity. In private prayer time, I have a chance to look back on myself, my relationship with God and with the others.
- Participating in this formation project made a big change in my life. I spent more time in prayer, had a closer relationship with God, more easily helped others, more carefully listened to others, and felt close solidarity with the others. In the other words, prayer is a strong adhesive to bond private life to community life.

From the above ideas, a key point is that by doing *lectio divina* the participants gained a deep awareness of the importance of the Holy Bible in prayer life. They also clearly recognized the close connection between prayer life and community life. They showed their commitment to deepen their spiritual life with God, and their relationships with the others grew in fraternity. It was a major goal of the project.

(vi) In discerning your vocation, what aspects of this project were helpful to your confidence and trust in making your choice?

Although the duration of this project was not long enough to make a decision about one's vocation, the participants were able to share their experiences about the influences of this project on their vocation decision process as follows:

- God nurtured my vocation by His words: the Holy Bible is one of the factors that helped me to discern my priestly vocation. Through the teaching of the facilitator, I have had more energy and decisiveness to continue to follow God's call to serve in priestly ministry.
- By spending more time in private prayer and in *lectio divina*, I discovered God's call prodding me into action on my vocation journey. I became fond of my priestly vocation. I will work with all my best to be faithful to God's call.
- Praying with the Gospel helped me to become more deeply aware and to have further strength in my determination to follow God's call.
- By praying *lectio divina* in private and in community, I had a chance to look at myself to correct some of my faults, to change some bad behaviors, to conquer some weaknesses, to confess my sins, to exercise the virtues, to adopt more good behaviors, and to become a holier person. In so doing, I trained myself to become more like Jesus.
- There were some changes in my life to live up to my priestly vocation. In relationship with God, I prayed more easily. With my classmates, I opened up more than previously, and was happy to volunteer to work at community services.
- After attending this program, I believed that my vocation was a special gift that God gave me. I lived in this community in peace and joy. Now, I am confident to walk on my vocation journey, because I believe that "The Mighty One has done great things for me (Luke 1: 49)."

- I am a great believer in the necessity of prayer in my vocation. Looking back on my past, sometimes I felt disheartened and treated my vocation with indifference, because I had been unfaithful with prayer time. The more time I spent with God, the more I had a clear view of my vocation, as well as more energy to live out God's call in my community.
- This program helped me to strongly discern my vocation. I have had a sense of a call to follow Jesus in my priestly vocation. Through praying *lectio divina*, I moved into the depths of my own heart to hear God's voice. God enthusiastically encouraged me to be confident in staying in my vocation journey with my classmates as close companions. After a private meeting with the facilitator, I had even more inner peace and confidence in my life.
- This *lectio divina* program gave me a chance to be sincerely discerning of God's plan for my life. Instead of the negative feelings such as fear, anxiety, stress, resistance, or depression, now I felt inner peace, joy, excitement, and love. I have more trust in God's love and providence. I am confident that God is with me at any time of my life, and walks right alongside me. Now I respect and have benefited from the silent time for prayer and from this community in which I find happiness.
- *Lectio divina* led me to a deeper, more intimate relationship with God. Through praying, I came to believe that a priestly vocation is God's call for me. God will give the needed graces to help me to go on. On my part, I will cooperate with the graces that God offers me. I asked the Holy Spirit to purify my heart and motives, and to help me to act concretely on this vocation. I often pray with the psalm antiphon "in Him we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28)."
- *Lectio divina* helped me to reflect upon the daily Gospel. In the presence of God, I also did general examen of myself: how did I cooperate with the grace that God gave me during the day? I prayed for the light to know God's will and what I am to do and how to do it. This was a daily prayerful reflection on vocational

discernment in order to know what God wants for me and where I can best be an instrument of God's love in the service of others.

- Although I had no new insights on my vocational discernment, I recognized the great value of praying in discerning religious life. I will continue to pray to find the vocation that brings me a happy and holy life, whether priest or brother, single person or married. Thank you, Father, for helping me to know how to listen to the voice of God in my private prayer time. Doing that, I looked at my gifts and recognized my weaknesses and strengths. This process will help my vocational discernment. Now, my issue is not whether or not I will become a priest, but how to foster an intimate relationship with God. I will try to carry His words with me in whatever task is at hand and with every person I encounter.
- The best thing that this program offered was a stronger environment of prayer in our community. This environment extended its sphere of influence in fraternal relationship between members of the community. Although I was not sure of my future vocation, at each moment I believed that my vocation is truly a call from God.

To have confidence in discerning a vocation requires both interior and exterior insights. This program, *Lectio divina*, offered techniques for each participant to set up a conversation with God. It helped them to get a deeper understanding of God's will in their vocational discernment journey and to have the perseverance it will require. From their sharing above, one could say that now they can listen to God speaking to them in their interior prayer, both publicly and privately, in their daily meditation on God's Word, and in silent reflection at the other times throughout the day. This program also offered the skills of listening and of living in community. Therefore, they also listened for God's prompting and God's divine intuitions externally through human voices, whether in spiritual direction or in their daily lives in community with their brothers.

From the above comments, it is clear that this project challenged each person to look back on himself and to compare himself with the characteristics of priestly life, through prayer time and by living in community. Although the duration was too short to be able to make a final decision, there was one member who did. He felt it was too difficult to live in harmony with the others. In his relationship with the others, he easily became angry, and had difficulty accepting the others. In addition to the planned private meeting with each participant, I met with him two more times to help him. He recognized the problem from his own past, and was able to be open to the future, trusting God's love and forgiveness. I advised him to trust in God patiently, and not to rush, or be pressured into making a hurried decision. However, after meeting with his spiritual director and the rector of this program, he made the decision to leave the community after Christmas holiday break.

Discernment of a vocation is not a problem to be solved "in one morning and one afternoon", especially in religious life. This is a mystery requiring the candidates to live and let go step by step. This program offered praying as a basic instrument of discernment to the priestly candidates. I hoped that with the gift of God's graces, the participants would hear the voice of God's call, and recognize the way God walks with them and offers them the most happiness and inner peace.

3/ The insights for improvement this project

When I chose this project, the definition of the word seminary from Merriam-Webster Dictionary raised a powerful thought in my mind. The English word seminary has as its Latin source, *seminarium*, "seed-plot", a place where seedlings are nurtured and

grow, a derived from semen, “seed”. Using this image, one can say that seminary is a rich soil garden to plant the priestly vocation. The farmers must prepare the seeds, by collecting the good seeds, then, at least soaking them, before they sow them, in order to achieve a high rate of germination and produce a succession of good harvests. The pre-seminary year is the time to prepare the seed of a priestly vocation before planting it in the soil of seminary. Although the candidates are recruited, they need to try living in the community and prayer life. Just as seeds grow together in gardens, the pre-seminarians live in community. They live together in an environment for them to grow into mature human beings. Just as the seed is soaked in water, the candidates practice *lectio divina*, a great ancient practice prayer, to help them entering into a place deep within themselves, where God reveals His call to them.

From the participants’ feedback, I would conclude that this project was successful. The main power that helped this project is the activity of the Holy Spirit, as well as the living Word of God. Doing this project made the relationship between the facilitator and the participants become trusting and warm. On my part, using the skills in spiritual direction and counseling, I helped them to share easily with me about their vocation issues, especially in private meetings. I used my time to observe, to understand them by joining most of their activities. This was also a means to draw the facilitator and the participants close.

Through doing this project, there was a change for better in the participants. This project was very helpful for the candidates before they joined seminary. Since then, the seminarians who attended this project continued to communicate with me. They are very

grateful for the things that they have learned from this project. Most important, they continued to practice the skills that they learned. In the last email, one of the seminarians shared:

“Father, we were grateful for the care you showed us during the short time you taught and shared with us in our daily lives. We learned not only from your teaching, but also from what you did for us. Therefore, now we have learned how to take care for the members in our community, not only the members of our archdiocese but also with the other members from the other dioceses. We continue to use *lectio divina* as the way to pray in private time as well as in our small groups. Now the professors in formation staff are also focused on *lectio divina*. Thank you Father, for your teaching. Since *lectio divina* became very familiar to us, we have been able to share our experiences with other seminarians who belong to other diocese.” In particular, the rector of the pre-seminary program set up *lectio divina* as a requirement course, and invited me to teach it. On his email dated October 1, 2010, he wrote: “Dear Father Joseph Hoang, (...) looking back on the results of your program working with the pre-seminarians, we see great value in it. We observed and recognized the change in our students in their prayer life as well as in their community life. We made the decision that it would be the main course for the one-year of pre seminary training. Would you please let us know your availability, and we will make the schedule for the new class.” Unfortunately, I am not yet able to accept his invitation. However, I shared my entire syllabus and notes on this topic for another instructor to use in the interim.

In conclusion, the formation process of priestly vocation is a very important and difficult task for the Bishop and his staff. The discernment of one's vocation is complex and difficult to accomplish. This project is a means to help the candidates become more confident in choosing a lifestyle which will serve God's people in their priestly ministry. This training in *lectio divina* is a small step on the long journey of vocation. However, if one starts walking firmly, with God's graces, one will come to the goal.

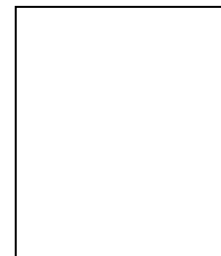
Appendix 1

ARCHDIOCESE OF SAIGON
Archdiocesan Pastoral Institute

APPLICATION FOR TRAINING PROGRAM

“Using Lectio Divina in A Support Group”

In order to come to know you better and thus help you as you discern the direction in which the Lord is calling you, we ask that the following information be given. All information is held confidential.



PERSONAL BACKGROUND

Name Telephone.....

Birth Date Place

Residence
(Street Address) (City)

Parish.....
(Name) (Street Address) (City)

If you are a convert to Catholicism, what was your previous religion?

FAMILY BACKGROUND

Name of Father: Is father living? [] Yes [] No

Address: If no, give date of death:

Father's religion: Father's Occupation.....

Name of Mother: Is mother living? [] Yes [] No

Address: If no, give date of death:

Mother's religion: Mother's Occupation.....

Date of Parents' Marriage

(Month) (Day) (Year)

Place

(Church)

(Street Address)

(City)

Parents' state in Life:

Living together? Separated?.....Divorced?.....

Please list your siblings (include names of their spouses, if married) in order of birth.

.....
.....
.....
.....

Are any of your siblings priests or religious?

EDUCATIONAL BACKGROUND

High School	Location	To	From
College	Location	To	From

List all academic degrees and institutions granting them:

Degree	Year Conferred	Field	School

WORK EXPERIENCE

From	To	Company	Type of Work	Reason for Leaving

VOCATION SITUATION/INTERESTS

Briefly describe your hobbies and interests:

.....

.....

When did you apply to the formation program of the vocation office?.....

Have you ever been admitted to a seminary or novitiate? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you ever been refused admission by a religious community? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If you answered yes to any of the above questions, please explain on a separate sheet of paper.

Your signature

Date

Appendix 2

FINAL EVALUATION

Thank you very much for your collaboration during this training project. To evaluate the effectiveness of this project in your life, as well as providing more experience for the facilitator, please respond to each of the following questions by circling the appropriate number.

1	2	3	4	5
Excellent	Very Good	Good	Fair	Poor

1. The training project helped me to gain new insights	1	2	3	4	5
2. The contents of this project were helpful	1	2	3	4	5
3. Organization and preparation of the facilitator	1	2	3	4	5
4. The manner of the facilitator's presentations	1	2	3	4	5
5. The student's participation	1	2	3	4	5
6. The change in my prayer life	1	2	3	4	5
7. The change in my community life	1	2	3	4	5

1. In the following topics that were taught, please rank them in order of importance, with the most important as number 1.

- Prayer in the Bible and in the Church's tradition
- *Lectio Divina* : in private and in the group
- Listening skills
- Skills to live in community life

2. Please choose a session that you liked the best, and explain why you chose it?
3. What additional ideas about the content of this training project could you suggest? What other topics that should be included? Please explain.
4. Please share a good experience that you had in small group?
5. What factors helped to develop the fraternity and cooperation needed for community life while focusing on God's word?
6. In discerning your vocation, what aspects of this project were helpful to your confidence and trust towards making your choice?

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