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—JAMES K. HAMPTON, assistant professor of youth ministry,
Asbury Theological Seminary

DIVINE INTERVENTION

*Encountering God Through the
Ancient Practice of Lectio Divina*

Tony Jones



TH1NK
P.O. Box 35001
Colorado Springs, Colorado 80935

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To Charlie, Katy, and the youth of Colonial Church

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PREFACE

Welcome into a mystery. Welcome to an ancient *and* modern way of listening for God in your life. In the coming pages, you'll run into some old Latin words. You'll read about believers who lived long before you and me. You'll also see how an ancient method of prayer, *lectio divina*, holds great promise for us, living in the noisy twenty-first century as we do.

Let's get to those Latin words right away. *Lectio divina* is Latin for "sacred reading." You probably recognize the English words *divine* and *divinity* as forms of *divina*. Sure enough, they come from the same root word. Though not quite as obvious, *lesson*, *legend*, and *election* come from the same root word as *lectio*.

Lectio divina has four steps, and you'll find out more about them in the coming pages. Because these steps began during the time when Latin was the language of the church, they are still known by their Latin names.

1. *Lectio* [LEX-ee-o]: a selection or a reading
2. *Meditatio* [meh-di-TA-tsee-o]: thinking over or meditation

3. *Oratio* [o-RA-tsee-o]: speaking or praying (words like *orate* and *oral* have the same root word as *oratio*)
4. *Contemplatio* [con-tem-PLA-tsee-o]: contemplation

Don't be intimidated by these words, even though they're Latin. They may make *lectio divina* seem mysterious — that's okay — but they're nothing more than words to describe the different stages of this type of prayer.

Now that we have that out of the way, I hope you can immerse yourself in what's ahead. *Lectio divina* has been a great discovery for me and for people around the world over the past few years. I can honestly say that every time we've used *lectio divina* in our church, students and adults have been amazed at how clearly they've heard from God during the process.

It's going to take some practice and some discipline, but I know you're up for it. Give it a try; maybe even make it a part of your daily time with God. I think that you, too, will be amazed at how God speaks to you.

Part 1

INTRODUCTION

WHAT'S THE POINT OF SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES?

I live in Minnesota. It snows a lot in Minnesota, but actually, I don't mind the snow or the cold weather. If you live in a similarly snowy climate, you know that it can be tricky to drive in the winter. The roads get slick and cars and trucks slide around with reckless abandon.

I learned all about this when I was fourteen; that was the year I went to Esse Driving School once a week. I sat in a class with a bunch of my peers, and we learned the rules of the road. I learned who has the right-of-way when four cars simultaneously arrive at a four-way intersection. I learned how far in advance of a turn you should use your signal. And, most memorably, I learned from some really gruesome films how awful a car wreck can be. (They had titles like *Mechanized Death*, *Wheels of Tragedy*, and *The Last Date*. I distinctly remember one, *Sounds of Terror*, that had no narrator, just the shrieks of people trapped in their cars after accidents—it was horrible!)

Then it was time for behind-the-wheel training. On the first day, the instructor, Scott, had me drive around quiet neighborhood streets. I practiced that turn signal, came to a complete stop at every stop sign, and backed up using only my mirrors. On the second day, Scott and I took to the freeway. I counted, “one one-thousand, two one-thousand, three one-thousand,” between the car in front of me and my own vehicle. I made sure to check my blind spots. And I had to merge into traffic going sixty miles an hour. To this day, I remember the fear I felt as Scott said in a loud and firm voice, “NO! Don’t slow down! Speed up!”

And on the third day, Scott and I ventured into downtown Minneapolis, where I navigated rush-hour traffic. Trucks cut in front of me and taxis honked. And I had to parallel park as a line of commuters anxiously tried to squeeze past me. On each of these days, what I had learned in the classroom was put on the line.

My birthday is in March, and I got my driver’s permit in the spring of my freshman year of high school, when I was fifteen. I spent the summer driving, always with one of my parents riding shotgun. I drove whenever I got the chance, and eventually I got the hang of it. Gradually, I stopped thinking about when to turn on my signal—I just did it instinctively. And I started to intuitively know how close was too close to follow another car. The money that my parents had invested in driving school was paying off!

That fall, I was a sophomore. For Thanksgiving, we traveled about an hour southwest of the Twin Cities to spend the long weekend with my grandparents in Gaylord, Minnesota. Gaylord is a sleepy little farming town of about five thousand residents. Early that morning, as we drove out to Gaylord through farm fields and small towns, the countryside was becoming a winter wonderland. The snow was falling in big flakes, and we were singing, “Over the river and through the woods, to Grandmother’s house we go!” It was like a postcard. But little did I know what was in store.

After gorging ourselves on dinner, taking a nap, and watching some football, my dad said, “Tony, let’s go driving.” I felt a mixture of joy and fear—I had never driven in winter conditions before. We went outside, and my dad buckled my two younger brothers in the backseat. I climbed behind the wheel of “the beast,” a Ford LTD Country Squire station wagon, complete with faux wood paneling. The old Country Squire boasted a huge engine—eight cylinders—and rear-wheel drive (notoriously bad for driving in snow).

For the next hour, on the wide, silent streets of Gaylord, my dad schooled me in winter driving. He had me slam on the brakes to feel the wheels locking up (this was before antilock brakes!). He taught me to pump the brakes if I hit a patch of ice. He had me drive the car into a snow bank and get it stuck and then shift from forward to reverse, forward to reverse, rocking the car until it came free. And he had me fishtail so the back of the car swung uncontrollably from one side to the other. In traffic, this can be deadly, since it’s possible to spin a 360 into oncoming traffic before you know it.

As drivers in northern climates know well, getting out of a fishtail can be the trickiest thing of all to learn. The reason it’s so difficult is that every bone in your body, every instinct you’ve got, is telling you to spin the wheel in the opposite direction of the car’s frenetic twisting. But, in fact, to get a fishtailing car under control, the driver must turn *into* the spin.

No matter how many times you’ve heard a driver’s ed teacher tell you, “Turn into the spin,” you simply cannot learn this driving maneuver until you try it yourself. That night in Gaylord, I had to experience it to really believe that turning into a spin would help me regain control of the car.

LEARNING BY DOING

I’ve been driving for twenty years now, and I rarely think about it. I absentmindedly drive about every day, and yet I don’t go careening

off the road. I have internalized all the things I learned when I was fourteen and fifteen. Not only that, I've adjusted my driving as I've learned new things. I've driven everything from a "three-on-the-tree" forklift to a school bus to the family minivan. I've driven across the U.S. many times, and I've driven in European cities where it's every man for himself. I've had to adjust as cars change and driving laws change.

The ancient philosopher Aristotle had a name for this. He called it *phronesis*, which can be translated as "practical wisdom." Aristotle said that most people become skilled at doing things by a combination of learning and experience. We might say it's a combination of "book learning" and the "school of hard knocks." It's not just one or the other but a combination of the two that makes someone an expert at something.

Now think of how many things in your life fall into this category. Do you write poetry? Play chess? Run in races? Water-ski? Play the trumpet? Virtually everything you do in life, and everything you want to get better at, requires a mix of thoughtful reflection and active experience. You can't get better at the trumpet just by listening to Wynton Marsalis talk about becoming a great trumpeter. You've got to practice. But practice isn't enough, because you've also got to sit down and learn how to read the music on the page.

The Christian life is just this kind of endeavor. Most of us know that Christianity is not merely the way one lives—many people live very Christlike lives but are not Christians. But I do think that some of us have erred in the opposite direction: We've acted as though Christianity is almost exclusively about *thinking* the right things. We assume that if we just memorize enough Bible verses, go to enough Bible studies, and read enough theology books, then we'll get it right.

But being a Christian isn't like that at all. Instead, Christianity is a *way of life*.

More on that in a bit. But first, allow me another metaphor. Both

of my brothers were hockey goalies growing up. They went to goalie clinics, had special goalie coaches, and went to summer camps just for goalies. But for all of the time they spent sitting with a coach, looking at markings on a whiteboard, and talking about “playing the angle,” there was one thing that really made the difference: practice. That’s not to say that all the chalk talk wasn’t valuable, but my brothers would tell you that getting onto the ice for practice and taking shot after shot after shot was what really made all that coaching come to life. And games were even more important to their improvement as goalies.

It was by playing the game that they really learned how to cut off the angle on a shooter, how far to come out of the net on a breakaway, and how to stay on their feet when facing a two-on-one. By playing hundreds of hours of hockey, Andrew and Ted became outstanding goalies. Playing goalie became *instinctual* to them.

CHRISTIAN SUPERSTARS

For Wayne Gretzky, the “Great One,” hockey was purely instinctual. It’s said about Gretzky that he not only knew where every other player on the ice was, but where every other player was *going to be*—that’s what made him the greatest hockey player of all time. Similar things could be said of a whole host of individuals who have become superstars in their own fields of expertise; for instance, Michael Jordan in basketball, Gary Kasparov in chess, Annika Sorenstam in golf, or Yo-Yo Ma on the cello. Each of these individuals has risen far above the ordinary in their respective fields. When mortals like you and me watch or listen to them, we’re blown away, primarily by one thought: “I’ll never be as good as that!”

As Christians, we’ve got our own list of superstars, of individuals who have so outshone the rest of us that we look at them with awe. I know that I often think to myself, *I can never be as good a Christian as that*. Here are a few of the people I most admire:

Mother Teresa (1910–1997) was a seemingly frail nun from

Albania who lived among the poor and lepers of Calcutta, India. She said that she saw Jesus in the eyes of every person who needed her help, and she did naturally what so many of us know we should do but spend most of our lives avoiding.

Francis of Assisi (1182–1226) gave up his comfortable life as a clothes merchant to dress in rags and work with the poor and needy. When no one would listen to his message, he went into the woods and preached to the animals—that’s how much he wanted to share the good news of God.

Benedict of Nursia (480–547) was another young man who gave up a lucrative and rewarding career as a scholar in order to radically follow Jesus’ call. Over the years, his life of faith was so attractive that dozens of men and women joined him in his community, and the Benedictine monks and nuns of today are their heirs.

Sojourner Truth (1797–1883) was born a slave in upstate New York. At age thirty, she escaped to Canada with her fifth, and youngest, child. When she returned to the U.S., she became a preacher and a crusader for abolition and women’s rights. Although she had no formal education, she was known to hold congregations spellbound with her words, including her most famous speech, “Ain’t I a Woman?”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945) was a great theologian who had the opportunity to stay in safety, teaching at Union Theological Seminary. Instead, he returned to his native Germany and started an underground seminary that was ultimately shut down by the Nazis. Bonhoeffer was executed in a Nazi concentration camp for his part in a plot to assassinate Hitler, but not before he wrote some of the most compelling theology of all time.

We have a name for people like these in Christianity. We call them “saints”—that’s our equivalent of superstars. Some are officially canonized as saints by the Catholic Church. Others fall under

that title more generally, but they all offer a great ideal of what it can and should mean to be a follower of Jesus Christ.

We should not be intimidated by people who are saints. When I read a great novelist like, say, Ernest Hemingway, my first thought is usually, *I should quit writing because I'll never be that good*. But that thought always passes, and soon the great writing inspires me to write more and write better. The same went for my brothers when they watched a professional hockey goalie, and the same probably goes for you. When you see someone who excels at the very thing that you love, doesn't it cause you to want to be better? Doesn't it inspire you?

That's exactly what the lives of these saints should do. And, if you're anything like me, there are all sorts of other Christian saints in your life—grandparents, friends, people at your church, your parents, other family members. These are the people who inspire us onward in faith.

THE CHRISTIAN WAY OF LIFE

One of those faith heroes for me is a friend named Brian. For almost three decades, Brian was a pastor of a church that he started near Baltimore. He's written a few books, so now that he's retired as a pastor, Brian spends most of his time traveling and encouraging Christians around the world.

One of the things that I admire most about Brian's faith is that he rarely gets discouraged, even when things don't go his way. When people criticize what he's written or something he's said, he doesn't let it get him down. I don't think that is because he is impervious to criticism. No, I think it's because he has committed himself so entirely to Jesus that he is confident of his standing before God. He simply does his best, speaks the truth, and trusts that God is taking care of him.

For all of us, the saints in our lives, the "faith superstars," give us something to emulate, something to strive after. And—here's the

most important thing—they've made faith into their *way of life*. It's this lifestyle, the Jesus lifestyle, that is most inspiring to us.

What is the "Jesus lifestyle"? Well, think for a minute about how Jesus approached his first followers. Here's how it's recorded in the gospel of Matthew:

Walking along the beach of Lake Galilee, Jesus saw two brothers: Simon (later called Peter) and Andrew. They were fishing, throwing their nets into the lake. It was their regular work. Jesus said to them, "Come with me. I'll make a new kind of fisherman out of you. I'll show you how to catch men and women instead of perch and bass." They didn't ask questions, but simply dropped their nets and followed.

A short distance down the beach they came upon another pair of brothers, James and John, Zebedee's sons. These two were sitting in a boat with their father, Zebedee, mending their fishnets. Jesus made the same offer to them, and they were just as quick to follow, abandoning boat and father. (Matthew 4:18-22)

What's clear in this little exchange is that Jesus did not ask Simon Peter, Andrew, James, and John to be sure they had the right beliefs before they could follow him. Jesus didn't give them a theology exam. He didn't even test their knowledge of Scripture.

Instead, he made it about as simple as you can imagine: "Follow me."

And their response was just about as simple. They got up and walked away from their occupation. Their new job was to follow this incredible man. Of course, the rest is recorded history: They followed Jesus for the next three years, through ups and downs. They watched him die on a cross. They witnessed his resurrection. And they went on to establish a faith in him that has lasted until today.

For the disciples of Jesus, faith was never a list of beliefs or a

“statement of faith,” as you see on so many church websites. For the three years that they lived with Jesus, their faith was this: getting up every morning, eating breakfast, and going wherever Jesus went. They ate with him, walked with him, listened to him preach, waited while he prayed, watched him heal people, and got him what he needed. When you think about it, it was actually pretty simple.

Of course, trials were and are a significant part of following Jesus, and some of them are severe. But the point of the Christian life is that it becomes a way of life, not merely a list of dos and don'ts or a statement to memorize and recite.

PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE

Now here's where I'll try to connect the dots.

If you're anything like me, you want to be a better Christian. In fact, that's something I wake up almost every morning thinking, and most nights I go to bed wondering if I've made any progress.

Say you're at a party, and someone passes you a joint. You want to say, “No, thanks,” and not give it another thought. Or you want to stop gossiping at work, but you seem to get caught up in it every day. Or maybe there's a broken relationship in your life that you want to get over, but you just can't. Whatever it is, you know there are areas of your life that you need faith to overcome. I've got my weaknesses, and you've got yours, but we both need the same thing: We need our faith to transform that area from trouble into good.

But how does that happen? Well, so often we are frustrated because transformation does not come by our own hard work. In fact, it often seems as if the harder we work, the less success we experience. What we really need is God's Holy Spirit to enter our lives—then the Spirit does the work.

But how does that happen? It happens by making room in our lives for God's Spirit. And that means moving aside some of the other things that take up our time and energy and refocusing on

God. In the Christian tradition, setting aside time for God is most often called discipline, and the things that people do during those times are called the spiritual disciplines. The great spiritual writer and Catholic priest Henri Nouwen (1932–1996) wrote,

In the spiritual life, the word discipline means “the effort to create some space in which God can act.” Discipline means to prevent everything in your life from being filled up. Discipline means that somewhere you’re not occupied, and certainly not preoccupied. In the spiritual life, discipline means to create that space in which something can happen that you hadn’t planned or counted on.¹

Another way to understand the Christian spiritual disciplines is to call them *Christian practices*. This label can help us to understand them in a less pejorative way than the word *discipline*, for it links the way of following Jesus to many other things that we do in life. Whether it be driving a car, playing goalie, or learning to read, most human endeavors require practice. The Christian life is no different. We cannot expect to be better Christians if we never practice the Christian way of life.

And, conversely, the more we practice, the better we’ll get at following Jesus. It’s inevitable!

Lectio divina, the practice described in this book, is just such a method for allowing God’s Spirit to infiltrate our lives. I hope you’ll find it as important in your life as I have in mine.