Lectio divina for kids: Teach your kids to pray with Scripture

This article is adapted from Lectio Divina for Teens: Reading God's Messages to You; The Catholic Family Book of Prayers; and 77 Ways to Pray with Your Kids.

If we want our kids to develop a deep, vibrant relationship with Christ, then we need to teach them to pray—and not just **memorized prayers** or spontaneous vocal prayer (as important as those are), but meditation and contemplation. It is in these ways of praying, the saints and mystics tell us, that we learn to listen to God…to hear the whispering of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and to discern the will of the Father. "In prayer, more is accomplished by listening than by talking," says St. Francis de Sales. And St. Catherine of Siena advises that we must "exercise together mental and vocal prayer, for, even as the active and contemplative life is one, so are they."

The ancient prayer practice of *lectio divina* is a great way to teach kids and teens Christian meditation, and to lead them to the threshold of contemplative prayer. And this prayer practice has the added benefit of introducing kids to the power and beauty of the Scriptures, in which God speaks plainly to our hearts through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

In this article, we'll talk about how to start practicing *lectio divina* with your kids:

- We'll start with a very brief history of *lectio divina*, and an overview of its four steps and the basic method.
- Next, we'll outline a guided *lectio divina* prayer service that you can use with your family.
- Then we'll talk about some simple ways to lay the

foundation for *lectio divina* with very young children.
- Finally, stick around for a list of Scriptures to use, and links to some helpful resources.

A quick overview of *lectio divina*

Lectio divina is an ancient method of praying with sacred texts; usually the sacred text comes from the Scriptures, but other texts may be used as well. The basic idea is to spend time listening deeply and intently to what God might have to say to you through the text—almost as if the sacred text were a much-cherished love letter from God.

The earliest Christians were Jews who were very used to praying with Scripture. St. Benedict of Nursia (480–543) was the first to use the term *lectio divina* ("sacred reading") when he included it in the rule of life for all of his monks. Other spiritual masters such as St. Bernard of Clairvaux, Guigo the Angelic, and St. John of the Cross continued to develop the practice over the centuries, until it reached the form most people know today.

It was Guigo, a Carthusian monk, who first set out the four steps or movements of *lectio divina*. Here they are, with their Latin names in parenthesis:

- **Reading** (lectio) In the first step, you choose a reading, and you read it several times, leaving room for the Holy Spirit to call your attention to a word, phrase, or line that God wants you to hear.
- **Meditation** (meditatio) In the meditation step, you think about the word or words that the Holy Spirit has called to your attention, holding them in your mind and considering them from different angles.
- **Prayer** (oratio) In the prayer step, you respond to the sacred words in prayer, either silently or out loud, or in writing.
- **Contemplation** (contemplatio) In the contemplation step,

you rest in God’s presence, quieting yourself and listening for God’s response to your prayer.

Even though we’ve outlined four movements or “steps” to *lectio divina*, it’s important to know that your prayer might not follow the steps exactly. *Lectio divina* is not like changing a car tire or making a cake, where the order of the steps is critical to success. It’s more like a deep conversation with a friend.

Although *lectio divina* always begins with reading, and often progresses naturally through the next few steps, you might find yourself bouncing around a bit. For example, you might read the text and have an immediate reaction that you voice to God (the prayer step); then, you might pause and think about the words more (the meditation step); then, if you find your mind drifting, you might go back and re-read the text again. After a while, you might move into contemplation . . . or you might not, and that would be okay.

As you’re introducing this method of prayer to your kids, explain to them that, unlike other types of writings (school textbooks, poetry, legal codes, mystery novels, and so on), the sacred Scriptures are “inspired” by God. Although the Bible was written down by human authors using their own words, the Holy Spirit “inspired” those authors to write the Scriptures in a way that would communicate what God wanted his people to know for their salvation. The Greek word that the apostle Paul used when he said that “all scripture is inspired by God” (1 Timothy 3:16) is *theopneustos*, or “God-breathed.” In other words, God “breathes” his Spirit into the Scriptures.

The same Spirit who inspired the authors of the Scriptures to write what God wanted to be written for the sake of our salvation also inspires us to understand what God is saying to us in those Scriptures. The Holy Spirit is the “coder” and the “decoder” of the Scriptures. This is why *lectio divina* is essentially different from a discussion or study of the

biblical texts: Rather than “studying” the texts, we’re intentionally praying with the texts, with the help (inspiration) of the Holy Spirit.

A lectio prayer service for the family

As with any new practice or habit, expect to try *lectio* a few times before your kids get comfortable with it. Regularly **previewing the Sunday Scriptures** with your kids lays a great foundation for *lectio divina*.

If you have very young children, skip down to the next section for some ideas about how to prepare them to do *lectio divina*.

Because *lectio divina* is ultimately a dialogue with God mediated by the text, it’s better suited to individual practice. However, as you introduce it to your kids, the following guided family prayer service may be helpful. Instructions are in bold, with spoken parts in italics.

Before beginning, choose your reading. Use one of the readings from the day’s Mass or Liturgy of the Hours as your text, or choose a favorite text of your own, or consult the list near the end of this article.

BEGIN with the Sign of the Cross and silence.

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Holy Spirit, you inspired the authors of Sacred Scripture to write what you wanted us to know for the sake of our salvation. Inspire us now to hear those words not only with our ears, but our hearts, so that we might know your saving Word for us today.

Silence.

READ the sacred text several times. Introduce this step with these or similar words:

Listen to this reading carefully, paying attention to what words, images, or ideas the Holy Spirit brings to your heart.

Read the sacred text slowly, savoring the words and pausing briefly after significant phrases and sentences. Observe a brief silence after the first reading.

Read the sacred text again (or ask someone else to do so), observing a brief silence afterward. If appropriate, pause to discuss the meaning of the text, using footnotes and commentaries as needed.

Read the text a third time, and observe a brief silence.

MEDITATE. In the meditation step, ask questions such as:

What words, images, or ideas did the Holy Spirit bring to your heart? What stood out for you in the reading?
How do those words, images, or ideas relate to your life right now?

What might God be saying to you (us) in this reading? What action might you (we) be called to take?

How does God's word make you feel? Excited, encouraged, comforted, loved? Or do you feel challenged, confused, or resistant?

Offer your own reflection as a model before inviting your children to share their own thoughts.

PRAY. Respond to the reading by addressing God in prayer. Say:

Let's respond to God's word for us in prayer.

Exactly how you pray the reading will depend on what surfaced during the meditation step. Some possibilities:

Offer thanksgiving to God for important insights that emerged from the text.

If the text was difficult or confusing, ask God for guidance and clarity.

If the text was challenging or caused anxiety, ask God for humility, strength, and the ability to trust in providence.

CONTEMPLATE*. Invite family members to still themselves and "rest in the Word," attending to God's presence:

Let's quiet our hearts for a few moments so we might hear God's response to our prayer. Rest now in God's presence.

CLOSE. After a period of silence, end with the Sign of the Cross:

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

*A note about the contemplatio step: By its very nature, **contemplative prayer** is difficult to teach. However, you can describe something of what it looks or feels like to your kids. The most basic feature of contemplation is that words are replaced by a simple feeling—what St. Thérèse of Lisieux describes as a "surge of the heart" and "cry of love."

In her autobiography, St. Teresa of Avila described the experience of contemplation in this way:

When picturing Christ in the way I have mentioned, or sometimes even when reading, I used unexpectedly to experience a consciousness of the presence of God, of such a kind that I could not possibly doubt that he was within me or that I was wholly engulfed in him. This was in no sense a vision. . . . The soul is suspended in such a way that it seems to be completely outside itself. The will loves; the memory, I think, is almost lost;
while the understanding, I believe, though it is not lost, does not reason—I mean that it does not work, but is amazed at the extent of all it can understand; for God wills it to realize that it understands nothing of what his majesty

represents to it. This is . . . entirely the gift of God.

Contemplation is a gift; it's not something we can make happen, or achieve, although approaching *lectio divina* with an open heart and spending good time on the first three steps prepares the way for contemplative prayer.
It's also important to note that people have different experiences of contemplation. Prayer is a personal relationship, after all, and every relationship is unique.

A simple *lectio divina* for young children

You can prepare young children for *lectio divina* by **previewing the Sunday Scriptures** with them, or by doing a a little **sacred story time** with them.

But even young children can try the basic movements of *lectio divina* following these steps:

Reading. Use a short story (the shorter the better, but definitely less than five minutes long) from a good picture Bible, a Bible-based storybook, or a children's book about the lives of the saints. Help your child prepare to hear the story by allowing a short snuggling/settling down time, and explaining what you're going to do: *"Now let's read a story about God (or Jesus). While I read, you listen for what God (or Jesus) is doing in the story."*

Don't worry about questions or interruptions; if they are about the text, then your child is already "meditating" on it; if not, address the distraction and gently redirect attention back to the story. You may want to read the story or parts of the story again, either immediately or during a later step.

Meditation. If your child doesn't have questions or comments of her own, offer some comments and prompting questions: *What is happening in the picture (or in the story)? Why? What are characters thinking or feeling? How is God (or Jesus) acting in this story?* (If God isn't directly mentioned in the story,

you may need to suggest some ways that God is quietly present.) *Which character would you like to be? What would you do differently if you were that character? How would you feel?*

Prayer. Invite your child to respond to the story in prayer: *"You know, God gives us stories like this to help us grow closer to him. Let's pray to God about this story. What would you like to say to God? Or what questions do you want to ask God about this story?"*

Provide guiding prompts, if necessary. Be sure to offer your own prayer response, both to make the experience prayerful for you and to model prayer for your child.

Listening. With young children, the contemplation step can be described as listening to God: *"Now that we've prayed to God about this story, let's be quiet so we can hear what God might be saying back to us, inside our hearts."* Take at least thirty seconds to be silent. If your child is restless or noisy, do your best to complete the period of silence yourself.

Wrapping up. You can finish by asking your child whether they heard God speaking to them. If they say no, you can reassure her that it's okay—sometimes we aren't listening closely enough, and sometimes God just likes to spend time quietly with us. End by **blessing your child**.

Scripture texts for *lectio*

If you're looking for some Scripture texts for your *lectio divina* prayer service, try some of these:

Luke 1:26-38 (The Annunciation): "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God."

Luke 2:8-20 (The Annunciation to the shepherds): But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people. . . ."

Luke 2:41-52 (The boy Jesus in the temple): When his parents saw him they were astonished. . . .

Luke 4:1-13 (Jesus is tempted in the desert): Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness. . . .

Mark 1:14-15 (The proclamation of the Kingdom): “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

Luke 5:1-11 (Jesus calls the first disciples): When he had finished speaking, he said to Simon, “Put out into the deep water and let down your nets for a catch.”

John 2:1-12 (The wedding at Cana): His mother said to the servants, “Do whatever he tells you.”

Luke 6:27-36 (Love of enemies): Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Luke 10:25-37 (Parable of the Good Samaritan): “Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?”

Matthew 14:14-21 (Jesus feeds five thousand): And all ate and were filled. . . .

Luke 10:38-42 (Mary and Martha): “Lord, do you not care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself?”

Matthew 14:22-33 (Jesus invites Peter to walk on water): Peter answered him, “Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.”

Mark 10:13-16 (Jesus blesses the children): “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.”

Mark 10:46-52 (The healing of Blind Bartimaeus): Then Jesus

said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” The blind man said to him, “My teacher, let me see again.”

Luke 8:22-25 (Jesus calms the stormy sea): A windstorm swept down on the lake, and the boat was filling with water, and they were in danger.

Mark 15:21-39 (The Crucifixion): “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

Matthew 6:25-39 (Do not worry): “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat [or drink], or about your body, what you will wear. . . .”

Isaiah 43:2-7 (The Lord will save): . . . you are precious in my eyes / and honored, and I love you . . .

Psalm 43:3-5 (Hope in the Lord): O send out your light and your truth / let them lead me . . .

Philippians 1:6 (The work of the Holy Spirit): I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Psalm 8 (Divine majesty and human dignity): . . . what are human beings that you are mindful of them, / mortals that you care for them?

Psalm 130 (Waiting for divine rescue): Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord.

Additional resources



If you found this article helpful, you may want to check out our book, ***Lectio Divina for Teens***. It introduces kids ages 10 and up to *lectio divina* in a colorful guided journal format.

Other resources to check out:

- ***Catechism 2708***
- ***General Directory for Catechesis 71***
- **Christian Meditation for Children: Lectio**
- ***Lectio Divina for Children and Teens: Activities to Help Young People Encounter God's Word*** (book resource for purchase only)