

Benedictine Spirituality – Part 1

Mechtilde de Hackeborn (1240/1241-1298) was born in the ancestral castle of Helfa to an extraordinarily rich and powerful family in Saxony. She was very frail and sickly when she was born, so the family quickly ran to find a priest so that she could be baptized before she died. After the baptism, the priest prophetically stated, “What do you fear? This child most certainly will not die, but she will become a saintly religious in whom God will work many wonders, and she will end her days in a good old age.” When Mechtilde was seven, her family went to visit her sister who was a nun in the monastery in Rodardsdorf. Mechtilde was enamored with the cloistered life and, after much pleading with her parents, was granted permission to enter the aluminate.

Ten years later Mechtilde found herself under the supervision of her sister, Gertrude, who was now abbess of the monastery. Mechtilde was well respected among the sisters. She was humble, amiable, and musically gifted and was given charge of both the aluminate and the choir. At the age of five, a special mystic by the name of Gertrude (later known as St. Gertrude the Great) was placed under her care. Many years later Mechtilde discovered that Gertrude had written a book about Mechtilde describing all her marvelous qualities and gifts which God had blessed her with.

Mechtilde was troubled by the book and took it to prayer where, holding Gertrude's book in His hand, Christ told her, "All this has been committed to writing by my will and inspiration; and therefore, you have no cause to be troubled about it." In this revelation she learned that many would experience God's love through this book, and that it should be called “The Book of Special Grace”, so she began to help edit the book herself which was made public and widely distributed immediately after her death.

Mechtilde was devoted to Mary who assured her of her salvation and, in a vision, instructed her to pray. “I wish that you recite three Hail Marys every day, remembering in the first the Power received from the Eternal Father, in the second the Wisdom received from the Son, with the third one the Love that has filled the Holy Spirit”. She entreated that Mary show her the path to holiness, and was shown a seven-tiered ascent, which undoubtedly influenced Dante's *Divine Comedy* where he illustrates a seven-tiered mountain through which one detaches from the seven vices. Mechtilde outlines the process:

Keep before thee His holy infancy, that thereby His innocence may supply for all the actions and omissions of thy infancy.

Keep before thee His fervent youth, which was so full of love, that it alone would suffice to enkindle the furnace of divine love; by it the lukewarmness and idleness of thy youth shall be repaired.

Keep before thee His divine virtues, which will ennoble and elevate thy actions.

Keep also my Son before thy eyes in directing to Him all thy thoughts, words and actions. He who did all things perfectly will efface all that is imperfect in them.

Rely also on Him, as a spouse relies on her husband; she is fed and clothed at his expense, and for love of him she cherishes and honours his family and friends.

The soul must be nourished by the Word of God, as by the choicest food; it must be clothed and adorned carefully with what pleases Him.

With the example of His virtues, we should strive to imitate them. **We should make His family our own that is, His Saints love them, praise God on their account and incite them often to praise Their Beloved with us.**



Prayer Activity – Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina literally means “sacred reading.” It involves a deep, loving, reflective meditation and encounter with God. It is an ancient sacred prayer practice in which the Holy Spirit leads us from a deep understanding of the Scriptures to a loving and life changing relationship with God. Like any relationship, our relationship with God deepens and is strengthened by daily faithfulness to this practice. It requires time, dedication, persistence, and love.

As with all prayer, begin by placing yourself in the presence of God. Sit comfortably, becoming still and silent. Focus for a few moments on your breathing if that helps. Then pray a preparatory prayer such as: Lord God, I ask that all my thoughts and desires be expressed in words and actions that praise, honor, and revere you, and that contribute to your reign here on earth. Finally, state what you desire during this prayer (e.g., that I might grow in my personal relationship with you Lord).

1. Read the Word

Choose a passage of the Scriptures that you wish to pray. Read the text slowly, prayerfully, gently. Savor each portion of the reading, constantly listening for a word or phrase spoken specifically to you at that time.

Read the passage a second time, even more slowly than the first, maybe aloud. Again, open yourself to any words or phrases that might be speaking to you.

2. Reflect on the Word

Next take the word or phrase into yourself. Slowly repeat it to yourself, allowing it to interact with your inner world of concerns, memories, and ideas. Meditate about the meaning of the word or phrase. Allow this inner pondering, this rumination, to invite you into dialogue with God.

3. Respond to the Word

Interact with God as you would with one who you know loves and accepts you. Experience God using the word or phrase that He has given you as a way of blessing you, of transforming your ideas and memories awakened by your pondering. Talk to God as you would an intimate friend about what you have found within your heart.

4. Rest in the Word, in God

Finally, simply rest in God’s embrace. Rejoice in the deep felt sense that God is with you and loves you. If God invites you to return to pondering His word or to your inner dialogue with Him, do so. Learn to use words when words are helpful, and to let go of words when they no longer are necessary. You may find that sometimes you will return several times to the printed text, perhaps to seek a new word or phrase to ponder. At other times only a single word or phrase will fill the whole time set aside for prayer. Remember that there is no goal to this practice other than that of being in the presence of God.

Lectio Divina exercise summarized by Mike Higgins. Thank you!

Reading Assignment: Chapters 4 and 27