"This book is many things. It is a guide to biblical reading, meditation, and prayer. It reintroduces the truth that Scripture's sole purpose is to lead us to the living God in Jesus Christ. It lovingly opens up the riches of monastic and scholastic theology. But above all, this book is a work of spiritual instruction by one of the true spiritual masters of our time. Never has the Church more sorely needed theologians who are masters of the spiritual life, and, in our spiritually arid day, God has raised up Hans to direct our minds and hearts toward union with Christ."

—MATTHEW LEVERING,
James N. Jr. and Mary D. Perry Chair of Theology, Mundelein Seminary

"For a contemporary church that has worn away the point of divine love, Hans Boersma sharpens it again with the flint of tradition. In *Pierced by Love*, the title is more than metaphor; it indicates how we should experience lectio divina. The early and medieval church knew that reading the Bible meant being entered into as much as entering the text. Boersma reacquaints us with the dangers and costs as well as the fruits of divine reading."

—JESSICA HOOTEN WILSON,
visiting scholar at Pepperdine University; author, *The Scandal of Holiness*

"Though the Protestant and evangelical churches have begun to recover elements of the Christian tradition, especially patristic sources, the rich history and theology of the Middle Ages remains to be explored in its fullness. Hans Boersma's *Pierced by Love* is an excellent introduction to and exposition of early and medieval writings on sacred reading. The book's deep examination of medieval authors illuminates the Bible-centeredness of medieval theology and the text's many diagrams further reveal the richness of medieval reading and reflection on the Bible. One does not need to be an expert in medieval theology to benefit greatly from Boersma's analysis and his incisive treatment will change the way you read the Bible. Take up and read!"

—GREG PETERS,
Biola University and Nashotah House Theological Seminary

"Love for Christ flies off every page. With gentle profundity, Hans Boersma guides his reader through the healing process of lectio divina with the skill of a master, a master wounded by the arrow of the Master of all."

—ALEXIS TORRANCE,
associate professor and Archbishop Demetrios College Chair
of Byzantine Theology, University of Notre Dame

"Boersma calls Christians back to the ancient and medieval practice of a spiritual immersion into Scripture as the path to deeper union with Christ. By moving through the four steps of lectio, meditatio, oratio, and contemplatio, he shows how formation and encounter flow together as the reader finds Christ in the depths of Scripture's spiritual meanings. Scripture becomes sacrament—the place where we ascend to contemplative vision of Christ as we find him and are formed into him through its pages. Recognizing the need for sure guides in this journey, Boersma moves through ancient and medieval writers to build up a thick account of how lectio divina unfolds. The result is like moving through a medieval garden of delights in which the voices of Christian tradition swirl together to form a holistic vision of the Scriptures. This is theology in the best sense—historically rooted, spiritually alive, and oriented toward Christ as the telos of life."

—DALE COULTER,
professor, Pentecostal Theological Seminary

"The monk in me skips with delight on delving into this comprehensive exploration of lectio divina by Hans Boersma. The book is exceedingly modest, conversational in tone, and yet impressively profound. It is obviously the rich fruit of both long study in the Christian (especially monastic) tradition and long personal practice of lectio. Boersma refuses to dichotomize between exegesis and mysticism, and he rightly loses interest in any approach to the revealed text that is not ultimately headed toward union with God. Desire for God, thirst for the living Christ, is Boersma's key to biblical anthropology, and this vision everywhere informs his interpretation and application of the divine words."

—SIMEON LEIVA-MERIKAKIS,
OCSO, St. Joseph's Abbey

PIERCED BY LOVE

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Divine Reading with the Christian Tradition

HANS BOERSMA

LEXHAM PRESS

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Seduxisti me, Domine, et seductus sum

Tu m'as séduit, ô Seigneur, et moi, je me suis laissé séduire

Thou hast seduced me, O Lord, and I have been seduced

Jeremiah 20:7

Contents

Prayer for Lectio Divina

+ In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.

My heart hath uttered a good word: I speak my works to the king:
My tongue is the pen of a scrivener
that writeth swiftly. *Ps 45:1*

My heart hath said to thee: My face hath sought thee:
thy face, O Lord, will I still seek. *Ps 27:8*

One thing I have asked of the Lord, this will I seek after;
that I may dwell in the house of the Lord
all the days of my life. *Ps 27:4*

My soul hath thirsted after the strong living God;
when shall I come and appear before the face of God?
My tears have been my bread day and night,
whilst it is said to me daily: Where is thy God? *Ps 42:2–3*

How sweet are thy words to my palate!
more than honey to my mouth. *Ps 119:103*

If I have remembered thee upon my bed,
I will meditate on thee in the morning:
Because thou hast been my helper.
And I will rejoice under the covert of thy wings. *Ps 63:6–7*

They that sow in tears
shall reap in joy.
Going they went and wept, casting their seeds.
But coming they shall come with joyfulness,
carrying their sheaves. *Ps 126:5–6*

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son: and to the Holy Ghost;
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be;
world without end. Amen.

Blessed Lord,
who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning:
Grant that we may in such wise hear them,
read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them,
that by patience and comfort of thy holy Word,
we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life,
which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ.
Amen.

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My wife Linda read and commented on the entire manuscript. God is most gracious in piercing my soul with his love, and especially in his skillful use of my wife's loving support as his arrow.

Advent 2021

Abbreviations

ACCS	Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture
ACW	Ancient Christian Writers
AMMTC	Ancient Mediterranean and Medieval Texts and Contexts
BCCT	Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition
BRe	*Biblical Reception*
CFS	Cistercian Fathers Series
CSS	Cistercian Studies Series
CWS	Classics of Western Spirituality
FC	Fathers of the Church
HTR	*Harvard Theological Review*
LCL	Loeb Classical Library
MMT	*Medieval Mystical Theology*
MST	Mediaeval Sources in Translation
MWS	Monastic Wisdom Series
NPNF	*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*
PL	*Patrologia Latina*
RB	The Rule of Saint Benedict
SJT	*Scottish Journal of Theology*
SMCH	Studies in Medieval Cistercian History
ST	Studies and Texts
ST	*Summa theologiae*
TAPS	Transactions of the American Philosophical Society
WSA	The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century

Figures

Introduction

Divine Reading of Divine Scripture

Lectio divina is nothing out of the ordinary. It is what happens naturally when Christians wrestle with the biblical text. The Latin term *divina* may intimidate us into thinking it is something different from what we typically do in reading the Bible. But *divina* does not mean "esoteric"; it is more akin to our term *holy*. The Scriptures are holy—set aside for a unique purpose. Scripture is divine in the sense that it has a special place within the church. Lectio divina simply means reading the Bible the way it's supposed to be read—as divine Scripture.

Just as Scripture is divine, so our reading must be divine. Our reading must do justice to the purpose for which Scripture has been set aside. Origen makes this point in a letter he probably wrote to Gregory Thaumaturgus around the year 235:

> Devote yourself (*proseche*) first and foremost to reading the holy Scriptures (*theiōn graphōn*); but devote yourself (*proseche*). For when we read holy things (*theia*) we need much attentiveness (*prosochēs*), lest we say or think something hasty about them. And when you are devoting yourself (*prosechōn*) to reading the sacred texts (*theiōn*) with faith and an attitude pleasing to God,

> knock on its closed doors, and it will be opened to you [Matt 7:7] by the gatekeeper of whom Jesus spoke: "The gatekeeper opens to him" [John 10:3]. And when you devote yourself (*prosechōn*) to the divine reading (*theia*), uprightly and with a faith fixed firmly on God seek the meaning of the divine (*theiōn*) words which is hidden from most people. Do not stop at knocking and seeking, for the most necessary element is praying to understand the divine words (*theia*).

Two Greek words stand out in this brief excerpt from Origen's letter. First is the term *theios*, which literally translated would yield the English "divine." But the translator rightly uses the terms "holy" and "divine" interchangeably. Origen's point is that holy books call for holy reading; divine books require divine reading.

The second term is *prosochē*, or "attention." Origen advises Gregory to read the biblical text with attention. Here, I'm somewhat less happy with the translator's equation of attention with devotion. Devotion often carries the connotation of piety. Now, attention does include a pious attitude. But Origen probably had more in mind than just what we today call devotion. When monastic authors of the third and fourth centuries spoke of attention (*prosochē*), they had in mind vigilance, watchfulness, and self-awareness. The monk would watch his thoughts, making sure they were focused on God rather than on anything extraneous. Attention was the opposite, therefore, of distraction.

Origen wants Gregory to be attentive when he engages in divine reading. The Scriptures require his utmost attention. He cannot rush the reading, hurrying to quickly finish. No, divine reading requires

his single-minded focus on the biblical text, for only such attention will allow him to find its hidden meaning.

Finding this hidden meaning is the purpose of reading the divine Scriptures. Again, we need not think of anything esoteric here. Origen simply has in mind the New Testament realities of Christ and the church. When we knock and seek, we look for the sacramental or real presence of Christ. Raymond Studzinski, a Benedictine monk from St. Meinrad Archabbey in Indiana, puts it this way: "For Origen 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." To read the Scriptures sacramentally is to look for Christ as the content of the biblical text.

What is fascinating in Origen's letter is that he makes absolutely no distinction between lectio divina and regular Bible reading. They are one and the same thing. Origen was hardly alone in this. When we discuss the twelfth-century Carthusian prior Guigo II in chapter 2, we will see that he links the four steps of lectio divina to the four traditional levels of biblical interpretation. For Origen and Guigo—and this holds true for the premodern Christian tradition more broadly—lectio divina is the ordinary, standard way of reading the Scriptures. Proper biblical interpretation requires a divine or spiritual mode of treating the holy text.

It is important, therefore, to appreciate that lectio divina is nothing out of the ordinary. When we do lectio divina, we read Scripture in line with its divine character—as we always should. To be sure, this claim has a polemical edge. It implies that we do *not* find the meaning of Scripture simply by asking what the human author intended with

the text. We do *not* find the meaning of Scripture simply by sticking with a proper method, whether of a grammatical or a historical-critical nature. In short, we do *not* find the meaning of Scripture when we think of ourselves first and foremost as historians. We find meanings—note the plural!—of Scripture primarily by looking forward (to its divine purpose) rather than by looking backward (to its human origins).

Of course, we can use Scripture for other purposes. Origen himself famously constructed a critical edition of the Old Testament, the *Hexapla*, in which he placed the Hebrew text alongside a variety of Greek translations in six columns, which allowed for a careful comparison of the various texts. Although this endeavor was quite technical, Origen never lost sight of the primary purpose of searching for Christ as the hidden meaning of the text.

Origen's work on the *Hexapla* was perfectly legitimate, as are historical and archaeological investigations that focus less immediately on the spiritual aim of contemplation. In fact, both Origen's textual analysis and our own historical investigation can *serve* divine reading. But the point is that we shouldn't lose sight of this divine purpose in Bible reading. The search for meaning (that is to say, exegesis) is a search for God, not an attempt at historical reconstruction. And if exegesis is a knocking and searching for God himself, then lectio divina is simply what we do when we rightly handle the word of truth (2 Tim 2:15).

READING THIS BOOK

This book is not a how-to guide for lectio divina. Instead, we'll look at what happens spiritually in our lives when we embark on divine reading. To be sure, I hope this discussion will be helpful also for

people who wonder about what to do in lectio divina. That's just not my primary aim. Besides, I'm skeptical of how-to guides, and lectio divina is not the result of a method. The modern preoccupation with method is alien to a sacramental exploration of the divine Scriptures. Method assumes that empirical analysis of the text produces the one (and only) meaning of the text. Such is not the goal of lectio divina.

Still, it's possible to give advice for good reading strategies. Reading ought never to be a purely subjective enterprise, arbitrarily letting the feelings wash over you. Good reading invariably involves an encounter, with meaning occurring within the encounter. Lectio divina, too, aims at encounter. To read the Scriptures without asking how they call us to Christ is to ignore their fundamental purpose. This book will hopefully be a helpful antidote to seeing lectio as an excuse to leave behind our critical faculties and embark on a sentimental psychologizing of the gospel, for this is not at all what earlier generations of spiritual writers had in mind. They thought of it as a robust—indeed, often piercing and painful—process that demands a careful and deliberate reading of Scripture.

If reading means encounter, then the imagination is perhaps the key faculty that allows the encounter to happen. Words, when properly used, stir the imagination. Words make pictures. Words leave a visual imprint (an image) on the mind, which unites us with the external referent. This is why storytelling is indispensable in faith formation. Throughout this book, we will see theologians such as Anselm of Canterbury, Aelred of Rievaulx, and Bernard of Clairvaux using the insight that words make pictures. They recognized that through the imagination we are united with Christ as the one revealed to us in biblical words.

Pictures or images are often counterproductive because they are overly prescriptive. When we depict the scene of an event, we force the reader's imagination down a particular path. Without the illustration, the reader has the freedom to imagine the scene as he wishes. But once the picture is there, this freedom is gone: the only way of imagining the scene is the one the illustration provides. That's why movies based on novels can be such a letdown. They deprive us of the freedom to imagine the narrative for ourselves. Pictures tend to constrain rather than open up the imagination.

This book does include images, but they are not illustrations depicting particular biblical events. They do not, therefore, narrow or prescribe our imaginative faculty. Instead, the images in this book—taken from medieval authors—function in support of the words. That is to say, the images serve as repositories of particular truths or teachings. They are often fairly abstract, and they help us recall the content of Scripture. To give but one example, the image of Noah's ark devised by Hugh of Saint Victor in the twelfth century (and discussed in chapter 4) is more a diagram of salvation history than a visual representation of the historical ark at the time of the flood. Hugh's mural painting, therefore, did not narrow the imagination but opened it up. I have purposely included images (as well as other figures and diagrams) throughout this book because they give a clear impression of how it is that the imagination functions in lectio divina, in part through the judicious use of images.

The four traditional steps of *lectio* (reading), *meditatio* (meditation), *oratio* (prayer), and *contemplatio* (contemplation) form the frame of the practice. Repetitious reading, thoughtful and extended reflection on individual words or phrases, prayerful reflection on our own lives

in the light of our meditation, and finally silent resting in the love of God are the four basic elements. If you are looking for a practical way into lectio divina, the first recommendation I'd give is to read Guigo II's *The Ladder of Monks*, which I discuss in some detail in chapter 2. Meanwhile, here are a few simple guidelines to keep in mind:

- Find a quiet place and begin with a short period of silence to properly focus your attention.
- Read the passage repeatedly—perhaps about four times, interspersed with periods of silence.
- Meditate on a word or phrase that strikes you as significant. Ask yourself how it functions within its immediate context and within the Scriptures as a whole. Look for the revelation of Christ within this word or phrase. And ask what all of this has to do with your own situation and circumstances.
- As you pray, God will confront your life with the fruit of meditation. This may cause the pain of repentance. Or it may flood your heart with gratitude. In prayer, we bring our lives before God in response to the reading of the text.
- Take time throughout the process to pause and rest in silence before God. Keep Origen's advice in mind not to be hasty. It is when words and silence alternate that meaning can occur.

The structure of this book follows the four-stage movement of lectio divina. The first two chapters are introductory. I begin in chapter 1 by

asking how lectio takes us from sacrament (*sacramentum*) to reality (*res*). The process transfixes or pierces us, and in so doing it transfigures us. Chapter 2 offers a detailed discussion of the four steps of lectio divina by looking at the ladder metaphor in dialogue with Guigo II's *The Ladder of Monks*.

In chapter 3, we turn to the first step, that of reading (*lectio*). I explore how lectio divina offers an antidote to the vice of acedia or sloth, drawing on Augustine's understanding of words as means to overcome acedia and to center our hope on the eternity of God. Chapters 4 through 6 deal with meditation (*meditatio*). We first turn to the link between memory and meditation in chapter 4, looking especially at how Hugh of Saint Victor used Noah's ark to impress biblical truth onto his students' hearts and minds. Medieval theologians often compared reading to eating, so in chapter 5 we consider how they employed various alimentary tropes to make the point that we meditate on Scripture in the hope of tasting the sweetness of the Lord. We next turn to the imagery of the tree of life, which medieval writers such as Bonaventure loved to use in meditating on the cross. We will see in chapter 6 that lectio divina serves to unite us with the suffering of Christ on the cross.

With chapter 7, we turn from meditation to prayer (*oratio*). The piercing grief over sin, which we encounter throughout the tradition—in Augustine, John Cassian, Bernard of Clairvaux, Anselm of Canterbury, and Aelred of Rievaulx—calls us back to a more introspective form of Christianity. Chapter 8 turns to the final step of lectio divina by raising the perennial question of the relation between action (Martha) and contemplation (Mary). Though both are indispensable, we will see in this chapter why, throughout the tradition, Christians have

seen contemplation as the final, ultimate step not only of lectio divina but also of the Christian pilgrimage itself. This contemplation takes us to the ineffable mystery of God; the last chapter, therefore, shows that our silence anticipates the Great Silence of God's love in Christ.

This book is somewhat difficult to classify. It has an obvious spiritual component: we will retrieve the practice of lectio divina by going through each of the four steps. But you will also notice a marked historical component, for I will present many illustrations from and discussions of patristic and (especially) medieval tradition. Further, throughout the book, I will be discussing the theology that underlies lectio divina. And in doing all this, I will often appeal to the biblical witness—as did all previous generations of lectio divina practitioners. In short, biblical, historical, theological, and spiritual categories overlap and intertwine. I do so purposely, in the conviction that we need all four, in unison, as we try to read the divine book in a divine manner.

Finally, a comment on the Bible translation used in this book. For the most part, I follow the Douay-Rheims Bible from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The reason is that it translates the Latin Vulgate, and the spiritual writers I quote mostly followed the Vulgate. The Douay-Rheims Bible thus keeps us closest to the biblical text as these theologians would have known it. I do, however, make an adjustment for the numbering of the Psalms (and a few other passages). To accommodate current practices, I follow the numbering of most contemporary translations. Therefore, if you search the Douay-Rheims Bible (or the Vulgate or the Septuagint) for a psalm that I quote in this book, you will in many cases have to look for the one prior to the one mentioned in the text. (For example, Psalm 45 in this book is Psalm 44 in the Douay-Rheims Bible.)

I

Transfiguration

STABAT MATER

Love is the face of God. We see him face-to-face—Jesus, hanging on the cross. When the old man Simeon saw Mary with the child, he burst out in prophecy: "And thy own soul a sword shall pierce (*pertransibit*), that, out of many hearts thoughts may be revealed" (Luke 2:35). The thirteenth-century hymn *Stabat Mater* ponders the fulfillment of Simeon's words as the Savior's "mother stands weeping" (*stabat mater dolorosa*) by the cross. The second stanza describes the piercing of her soul:

Cuius animam gementem, contristatam et dolentem pertransivit gladius.	Through her heart, His sorrow sharing, all His bitter anguish bearing, now at length the sword has passed.

Singing this hymn, we do not objectively recount Mary's grief from a distance. Instead, we identify with her as she looks on her son being crucified:

Sancta Mater, istud agas, crucifixi fige plagas cordi meo valide.	Holy Mother! pierce me through, in my heart each wound renew of my Savior crucified:
Tui Nati vulnerati, tam dignati pro me pati, poenas mecum divide.	Let me share with thee His pain, who for all my sins was slain, who for me in torments died.
Fac me tecum pie flere, crucifixo condolere, donec ego vixero.	Let me mingle tears with thee, mourning Him who mourned for me, all the days that I may live.

The song beseeches the Holy Mother to nail or drive the wounds of the crucified into our hearts. We ask that we may weep with her and join her in mourning our crucified Lord.

Stabat Mater takes Simeon's words as a prophecy of Mary uniting with her son in his suffering, and the song invites us to identify with him as well. The painful transfixing (*pertransire*) of Mary's soul produces pain within the hearts of those who appropriate Christ's sufferings by meditating on them. The hymn is the outcome of meditative reading—lectio divina—both of Simeon's *Nunc Dimittis* (Luke 2:29–32) and of John's reference to Mary's presence at the foot of the cross. Throughout the centuries, interpreters have linked Luke 2:35 with John 19:25–27, despite the obvious difficulty that Luke's Gospel does not actually mention Mary's presence at the cross. But for attentive readers, such as the composer of *Stabat Mater*, the language of Mary being pierced inescapably echoes Jesus's being pierced on the cross.

The souls of both Mary and the chanter of this song are pierced with grief. In chapter 7, I will discuss in greater detail how compunction—puncturing or piercing of the soul—functions in lectio divina. For now, it is enough to note that it is this type of personal meditation

that evokes compunction in *Stabat Mater*. Lectio divina is a form of reflective or meditative reading of Scripture that brings us face-to-face with the subject matter of the text. The subject matter of the Song of Simeon is, at least according to *Stabat Mater*, the crucified son of the Virgin. With Mary, we see him face-to-face. It is the love of God in the face of Christ that both transfixes and transfigures us.

FLESH ON THE CROSS, WORDS ON THE PAGE

We reach the goal of the God who is love only through the pain of the cross. Similarly—and that will be the main point of this chapter—we reach the goal of lectio (contemplation) only through patient reading, meditation, and prayer. The initial stages of lectio divina (the lower rungs of the ladder) are indispensable. Why? Because flesh on the cross and words on the page are God's love in act. Saint Paul extols this love when he speaks of "the breadth and length and height and depth" of the charity of Christ, which surpasses all knowledge (Eph 3:18–19). These four dimensions cannot but remind us of the cross, where we see God's love in action. In John's Gospel, Jesus mentions only one of these four dimensions. He speaks of the height of the cross: "When you shall have lifted up (*hypsōsēte*), the Son of man, then shall you know that I am he (*egō eimi*)" (John 8:28). With these last words, Jesus identifies himself with the God who once revealed himself to Moses in the burning bush as "I am" (Exod 3:14). It is in the height of the cross that we see Jesus as God because it is there that he shows redemptive love.

Jesus uses the language of being lifted up twice more. First, in his nighttime conversation with Nicodemus, he explains that he will be "lifted up" (*hypsōsen*) like Moses lifted up the serpent in the desert

(John 3:14). Jesus links faith in the crucified Son of Man to eternal life (3:15–16). We join this eternal life of God by accepting the love of God displayed on the cross. Second, Jesus explains that it is when he is "lifted up (*hypsōthō*) from the earth" that he is victorious over the ruler of the world and will draw all things to himself (12:31–32). The cross is God's throne. Nothing on earth reaches quite as high as the cross of Christ, for nothing is as high or sublime as the love of God.

Lectio divina starts where God himself begins. Since God manifests himself primarily on the cross, lectio divina also takes this as its starting point. In the human Jesus, lifted up from the earth, we recognize the God whose identity is love. We find God in the words of Scripture—the *Nunc Dimittis*, the "I am" sayings of John's Gospel, the crucifixion scene. The eternal Word is revealed in temporal words—flesh on the cross, words on the page. We don't get to the capital-*W* Word without small-*w* words. We cannot bypass either the incarnate and crucified Jesus or the biblical account that speaks about him. Jesus is God's sacrament. Scripture too is God's sacrament, since both make present the reality or the truth of the love of God.

This chapter offers a word of caution against bypassing either the cross or biblical words. Both are sacraments of God's love for us. Sacraments are indispensable means of salvation. As we will see, the twelfth-century monastic writers Aelred of Rievaulx and William of Saint-Thierry, each in his own way, refused to ignore the sacramental cast of our journey back to the eternal Word of God's love. Friendship, for Aelred, is important because heaven itself is a place of friendship transfigured. In other words, temporal friendship on earth functions as a sacrament of eternal friendship in heaven. Similarly, for William, pictures of Christ's suffering are indispensable because they

are sacraments in which we encounter the truth of the love of God. Heaven transfigures suffering into the glorious reality of love. The sacramental reality (*res*) for which we long, therefore, is a transfiguration of the sacramental means (*sacramenta*) that we encounter on our earthly pilgrimage. And perhaps the most amazing truth is this: we ourselves are transfigured as we learn to see the transfiguration of sacraments into the reality of God's love.

We can make the same point by turning to the four steps of lectio divina. The last step is contemplation of the reality (*res*) or the truth (*veritas*) of God's love. But we are temporal, earthly creatures, and so we dare not bypass the initial three steps. We must first turn to the outward sacraments (*sacramenta*): we need to do the reading (*lectio*), the meditation (*meditatio*), the prayer (*oratio*). In these first three steps, we busy ourselves with ordinary words—reading them, thinking on them, and praying over them. Only after much patient exploration of the *sacramenta* do we get a glimpse of the *res* of God's love as he takes us beyond our words into contemplation of the eternal Word. It is typically only after much practice that, with Saint Paul, some are caught up into Paradise itself (2 Cor 12:4).

Lectio divina, therefore, is not a method or technique, which gives us guaranteed, easy access to psychological well-being. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger cautions against such a mistaken view of contemplation in his 1989 *Orationis Formas*, a "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation." Ratzinger directs us back to the cross: "The love of God, the sole object of Christian contemplation, is a reality which cannot be 'mastered' by any method or technique. On the contrary, we must always have our sights fixed on Jesus Christ, in whom God's love went to the cross for us and there

assumed even the condition of estrangement from the Father (cf. Mk 13:34)." This is wise counsel, for it is on the cross that we recognize the face of God.

So, lectio divina is an exercise in patience. It resists the temptation of jumping straight into contemplation. As this book unfolds, it will become clear that lectio divina is a slow and often painful process that takes seriously the sacramental character of God's revelation. Of course, God can reveal himself however, whenever, and to whomever he wants, no matter the path we ourselves have taken. But our job is to turn back, time and again, to the regular practices of reading, meditation, and prayer. It is in the incarnate Christ, made known in biblical words, that we witness the self-revelation of God's love.

In our impatience, we may be inclined to skip the first three stages. To do so would be an act of pride, for it would be an attempt to grasp the reality (*res*) of eternal life without paying due attention to the sacraments (*sacramenta*) that God intends to use to bring us there. Without meditation on the words of Scripture and the incarnate Christ, our attempts at contemplation cannot but flounder. Why? Because the *res* for which we long is embedded within particular, revealed *sacramenta*. We should not try to circumvent the particular ways in which God shows his love for us.

Christians naturally struggle with the tension between sacrament and reality. The reason is that, with Saint Paul, "we know, if our earthly house of this habitation be dissolved, that we have a building of God, a house not made with hands, eternal in heaven. For in this also we groan, desiring to be clothed upon with our habitation that is from heaven" (2 Cor 5:1–2). The groaning and desiring that the apostle notes mark all authentic Christian spirituality. But it is never a groaning and

desiring that dispenses with the temporal small-*w* words that God provides to draw us into his eternal capital-*W* Word.

It is true that negative theology requires us to negate all particular, positive statements that we make about God. But the silence that results from this negation is not sheer nothingness; instead, it is God's eternal fullness that escapes our linguistic abilities and so demands our silence. I will have more to say about silence and negative theology in chapter 9, but for now, let me simply observe that the aim of lectio divina is not an empty abyss but the deepening abundance of God's love in Christ. Our heavenly future—eternal contemplation of God—is the *fulfillment* of God's love in Christ, not its opposite.

Nowhere do we get as profound a view of God as on the cross. This is not to say that by looking at God's face on the cross, we fully grasp his eternal mystery. But it is to say that we should spend time with Mary at the foot of the cross, because nowhere else does God reveal his love more clearly. "Greater love than this no man hath, that a man lay down his life for his friends," says Jesus to his disciples (John 15:13). He calls us friends rather than servants because he keeps no secrets from us: he makes known to us everything he has heard from his Father (15:15). On the cross, God reveals himself to us as our friend, as the one who loves us to the point of death.

FRIENDSHIP TRANSFIGURED

But the problem is this: doesn't lectio divina take us away from the cross and from the friendship it conveys? Sure, we begin with flesh on the cross and words on the page. We read the Scriptures (*lectio*) and we meditate on them (*meditatio*). But lectio divina ends in contemplation and stillness. And heaven is eternal contemplation. So, in

the hereafter, we'll never read and meditate on the Scriptures again. Saint Augustine (rightly, I think) suggested that in heaven we will no longer need a Bible because we will have attained to the love of God itself—the aim or purpose of the Scriptures. In contemplation, we are done with meditating on the cross, leave behind the ups and downs of our personal relationships, and center on the unity and eternity of God. In short, the very purpose of lectio divina seems to be to take us away from the particular to the universal. Are the cross of Christ and his friendship mere stepping-stones to contemplative union with an eternal One?

We shouldn't brush off the objection too quickly. Both Augustine and lectio divina work with Plato's ladder. In his *Symposium*, Plato famously describes love as moving from the personal to the universal by climbing up a ladder of five rungs, each with its own type of beauty, so that we climb up from the beauty of a particular body to Beauty Itself. Love—*erōs* in Plato's dialogue—takes us from the first rung up to the fifth, and increasingly we lose the particularity that characterizes the love of individual things. At the very top, Plato figures, we arrive at the world of Forms or Ideas. Does it make any sense, someone might ask, to foster friendships with particular people if Beauty Itself is the only thing that truly matters?

Figure 1.1 suggests certain similarities between Plato's ladder, Augustine's move from biblical words to Love Itself, and the four steps of lectio divina. Plato, Augustine, and lectio divina all move from the particularity and multiplicity of temporal sacramental means (*sacramenta*) to the universality and unity of eternal reality (*res*). The Augustinian tradition—and the Christian practice of lectio divina—has an unmistakable kinship with Plato's ladder.