

READING THE WORLD  
THROUGH THE LIVING WORD

# FRANCISCAN LECTIO



FR. DAN RILEY, OFM  
WITH STEPHEN COPELAND



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*Franciscan Lectio: Reading the World through the Living Word*

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*To*

My mother, Jane Frances (Dalton);

My father, James “Jake” Riley;

My brother Jim, now deceased;

My younger brother, Denny;

and

My two sisters, Patty and Ellen.

*“Sometimes we go on a search and do not know what we  
are looking for until we come again to our beginning.”*

— ROBERT LAX



## A NOTE TO THE READER

*H*ave you ever tried running? Running takes us *outside* and *into* a world around us, but it doesn't ask for equipment—good running shoes and athletic clothes. Or how about practicing yoga? All you need is a mat . . . and a good teacher.

Lectio is its own practice. It is an opening to what reading means—to the meaning of our own reading of the world, reality, sacred texts, and everything that might open the eye of our heart. This intimate, ancient way of reading has been neglected in our age. Let us begin to call it Franciscan Lectio.

This might seem like strange and new territory. When Jesus sent his friends out into the world, he told them, “Take nothing for your journey.” They learned more about what they were to do the more they committed themselves to his simple call. *They discovered all that they needed along the way.*

Like running, like yoga, like the early call of the apostles, all that we need in Lectio will be found along the way.

Irish philosopher and poet John O'Donohue, who died in 2008, wrote, “I would love to live like a river flows, carried by the surprise of its own unfolding.” As you enter into this “river” it might feel unfamiliar or even unnerving—the uncertainty of not knowing where the bottom might be or whether there are other creatures lurking around your legs. Yet this is already the world in which we live—a world we are within and a world that is within us. Our imaginations and soulfulness come alive, as we open ourselves to *see* and to *read* with, what St. Bonaventure would say in interpreting Ephesians, “the eyes of our hearts.”

We are guides to one another in our silence, stillness, and joy in exploring that which is both ancient and new to us. We are in the river's flow together. Though we have always been in Christ, we begin to experience that we are truly made new again and again. Franciscan Lectio seeks, as T. S. Eliot wrote, to “arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

This humble book arises from some of my own personal stories and experiences: my longing to listen and learn *from* God *within* God's world, to come to know who I am before God, and to come to know who we are as God's people. You, too, might find that this simple quest inspires you to ask a common question: “Lord, what would you have me do?” In Lectio, we are invited into the simplicity of an open heart and mind, which might begin with a sacred text but then spirals out, opening us to seeing and listening to other creatures and the rest of the world as revelatory. Like anything rooted in mysticism, it is this “subjectivity,” beautiful openness, and infinite depth of Franciscan Lectio that makes it difficult, at times, to ascribe to words this practice without coming across as directive.

You should know that this is not a how-to book. This is an interpretive book, not a research document. Francis is an aesthetic and imaginal saint who, early on, walked into the world and invited us to do some magical thinking. Lectio, I believe, invites us to actively engage in vernacular theology.<sup>1</sup> We flow without obsessing over our destination. We “read” what is within us and around us without needing to commodify what we have learned. My goal in writing this book is not to give you the answer; rather, it is to inspire you to ask the question; to walk in unknowing, the forgotten, and to *re-cogito*—to come to know again. Though each of the four parts of this book has a heading and subheading, I do not seek to pin



down their meaning. I invite you now to not only read the words in this book but in between the lines as well, and to take time with the art I've included from my own journeying without any hurry to flip to the next page. I invite you to explore your own imagination; to gaze, consider, contemplate, and imitate what each section might mean to *you* in the context of the theme. All of this is an open-ended vernacular theology that Francis pursued and Clare practiced.

Author Gerald May calls this the “power of slowing.” In the worlds of culinary science, slow cooking, psychiatry, recovery, and spirituality, there have been interesting notations about the blessing of slowing. As I write this book, I pray that you and I receive the gift of slowing: to read it as you wish, no more quickly than your heart would take you.

Some of what I write in these coming pages might not make sense at first or seem rationally as if I am talking in circles; that is, until you experience Franciscan Lectio for yourself and understand that it's actually a lively sphere that spirals out as nature does. You might think of a seed with its taproot going *down* and its new shoot going *up* and winding through the soil *out* of the sun. This is the emergence of our lives as we are drawn to the Christ, the Cosmic One who is the light of the nations and the light for our own hearts. We are, in Lectio, involved in this ancient reading of life coming to be. As Christians we believe this spherical journey is the Cosmic Christ. We, in Christ, rise up from sheer nothingness into the fullness and wholeness of God, who is beyond our understanding. One might say that's a big leap. Yes, it is. That's why we take our time in our running shoes or on our yoga mat, now moving with the “power of slowing,” disciplining ourselves to a quiet journey that will ask us to rest along the way.

This book is like a Responsorial Psalm—a place between two large readings of life, be it Scripture or silence, much like the rest of the created order. The response is repeated as we go deeper into a psalm. It’s also why my default language is mystical and symbolic. The Word is not only read in words. Sometimes it’s not read in words at all, but in everything else, even in terribly disturbing moments. Going up is also going down. I’ve included poetry, art, the integrative work of philosophers like Ken Wilber (who takes us outside the structure of religion), and other contemplative outlets throughout each chapter. My goal in writing is not to control your Lectio practice! Rather, I hope that it inspires your imagination so that you *lose control* of your Lectio practice in your encounter with the Christ Mystery, who transforms us in unfathomable ways. You might find this new way of reading inspires your imagination, which indeed is a gift we have within the virtue of hope.

Maybe you’re wondering as you begin or continue this journey, “What do I need to learn to do Lectio?” When I began running a long time ago, I asked friends about the best shoes and local paths or tracks to train on. It was striking how often they indicated that shoes were most important. As we begin, may you find shoes that fit you well. Paths and tracks? That is up to you and your own felt experience, perhaps determined by whether you are running on your own or with others. Many of us have a habit of being weighed down by the accoutrements of its practice when we begin something, thinking we need a lot to get on with it. The wonderful thing about Lectio is that all you need are “shoes,” which is to say an open heart and mind as you engage sacred Scriptures, the texts of your life, and the first text Bonaventure tells us about: Creation around and within us. The path will unfold, circle, and spiral out in many ways.

Welcome to *Franciscan Lectio*. Let it be enjoyable. Francis is a saint of joy. His spirit moved him to dance on the face of the earth, even when he was encountering human misery and the pain of others. He helped them find a road to joy. Jesus's early followers sometimes wondered, "Lord, where do you stay?" and Jesus simply said, "Come and see." You and I are invited in Lectio to step beyond where we have been and follow the One who truly has stayed among us, who is present here and now, and bidding us to use all of our senses says, "Come and see."

*“Place your mind before the mirror of eternity . . .”*

— ST. CLARE OF ASSISI



*“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. God was in the beginning, he was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be.”*

— JOHN 1:1-3



*“Come; everything is now ready.”*

— LUKE 14:17



*“You . . . will set my feet in a free and open space.”*

— PSALM 31:9

## INTRODUCTION



I grew up in a public school family, which in those days was quite different from a Catholic school family. We were practicing Catholics, and our prayers were rich and full around our beds at night. Some of my friends were already beginning to feel confined by faith practices, and I understand now why they were experiencing discomfort and distance from religion.

As a public school kid, I went to “release time” religious education. A bus waited for us as we trailed out of the school building, then took us to the Catholic grammar school a mile and a half away. During a visit to the church one day, I remember Father O’Malley meeting us at the bus, juggling snowballs. But, most often, I sensed a taught separation between me and the sacred. During another visit, I remember our teacher telling us not to enter the sanctuary in the church and instructing us not to touch any of the vessels on the altar, which we needed to stay far from. Of course, then, there was a sturdy communion rail that would make it difficult to go further. All this seemed to heighten the sense that God was distant and untouchable, as if we were to be as well. There was an apparent divide between being human and being holy.

It wasn’t until I attended St. Bonaventure University that the veil was lifted.

Upon arriving on campus, I remember being given a list of books to buy at the bookstore. I bought a pile without paying much attention to their contents, tossed them in a bag, and carried them



back to Devereux Hall. There, I took each book out slowly, looking at it and placing each one on the other on my desk. The last one I removed from my bag was a Bible for theology class. I carefully picked it up, then put it in place on top of the others. It sat there, showing itself to me.

In the Roman Catholic tradition, the monstrance is brought out and placed, often on the altar or sacred alcove. I would have seen this numerous times. But now I was sitting immediately before the text, with full accessibility to this sacred book, what I was already beginning to believe to be God's presence. I had an inkling this was not first about instruction but about presence. I sat there in awe. It was as if I had a monstrance in our dorm room.

To have the Bible within a foot and a half of my face and know that I was able to open it myself, not needing someone else to open it for me, was one of the most powerful moments of my early life. There was no divide. A lifted veil. I lifted it up and opened its pages, as if I was entering a new land. This was much different from the structure of religion. Some might call it, a word used now, transformational. We will call it *Lectio Divina*.

An ancient tradition dating back to the third century, *Lectio Divina* is a practice that arose out of the desert from people determined to become more grounded in the radicalness and richness of gospel living. Some whom we now know by name and their practices left the cities of Egypt and entered the desert for solitude so that they would experience *metanoia*—rooted in the Word and a change of heart—in the dazzling sun of the desert, the earth, and a world beyond urban life. They sought to discover renewed focus and spiritual insight in experiencing God's presence deep within them and around them. They deepened their focus through reading,

memorizing and meditating, praying, and contemplating the Holy Scriptures—eventually called *Lectio Divina*.

That time, not unlike our own, called out for reformation. The Desert Fathers and Mothers realized that authentic spirituality needed to move from the inside out, not from the outside in, and move from a society that was materialistic. They realized that the Word became flesh, moving from the inside out, which revolutionized their spiritual practice. “The kingdom of God is within you. The reign of God is at hand.”<sup>22</sup> Simple ways of eremitical life in the desert and the practice of *Lectio Divina* shaped their way of life enough that monasticism began to form, incorporating this beautiful practice. It still does.

Over time *Lectio Divina* seemed to be reserved for monastics, much like contemplation. It revolved around the reading of a sacred text. Franciscan *Lectio* breaks open both of these notions and connects it back to the expansiveness and openness found in our sacred Scriptures, as well as the perennial wisdom and creation in which human life arose. Silence, solitude, simplicity, and service, as we will discuss later, were natural “sisters” of Lady Poverty and Lady Wisdom, practiced in different cultures and mystical traditions. *Lectio* is not restricted to monasteries or monks or “the religious” or even solely to sacred texts, but is instead an activity “in the sphere of love”—God’s presence—that is *holy and whole* everywhere. It is time for what was once held in monasteries, friaries, and churches to now spill out into the homes and public spaces of our world. It’s time for what was once reserved for Bible reading to now also spill out into Creation, the incarnate Word. We are to take it in, where and as it is.

The “school” I come from—the Franciscan way—found most of its classrooms and books in marketplaces and in the faces of the

poor; on the hillsides in mountain seclusion and in the eyes of lepers; in big cities, small towns, and universities; in sacred spaces and everyday places. Whether it was one person, one place, or one moment, the Franciscan disposition is that the reign of God is always at hand; the richness of God's glory is present here and everywhere. Each creature is a vestige of God's creative action and an expression of God's loving Word. This is the blessing of Franciscan *Lectio*. It is truly panoramic at a time when anxiety narrows us. The habits or patterns integrated into a way of life that we see in the way of Francis and Clare and their followers show us that they ran *into* life, inspiring us to do the same. *Lectio* is about reading or focusing or listening long enough and deeply enough so that beauty, depth, and connectivity emerge; peace and freedom inspire action and service.

St. Bonaventure describes justice as "the returning to its original beauty that which has been deformed." Franciscan *Lectio* inspires us to see original beauty more clearly and then to live out of that truth more naturally over time. I think that true freedom flows out of our rootedness in beauty.

Francis of Assisi walked in the world as if he were a gardener attending his great garden, plant by plant, amazed by everything that not only broke through the surface like the rising flowers but also all that was still in the dirt, yet to emerge. Though hidden, it was already there. Though many elements, it was always one garden. God's face, Francis believed, shone from within all that was created. Francis was a wanderer, a hermit preacher, and a minstrel of God. He was God's own juggler, juggling the wonder of the Word in the world. He was a person trying to find his way in the world, and I wonder if this is part of his hidden attraction.



At the end of Francis's life, he continued to tire his brothers out with new dreams, saying, "Let us begin now because up to now we've done almost nothing." Francis was reading and learning about God everywhere, beyond the church or the classroom, and responding to the Word as it was alive in everything. Francis realized that the world he was in held meaning in a different way.

Holiness and wholeness.

Simplicity and abundance.

Community and person.

Francis, a saint of peace, read the world and all of creation as a place where things converged in conversation for the renewal of his heart, the renewal of his brothers and sisters, the renewal of the earth upon which he walked, and the renewal of the broken world and church where he prayed and worshiped.<sup>3</sup>

Word and world—indeed this is our home, and we are finding ways to choose to live here together with one another. We need to pick up the Bible and at the same time our world, holding them and letting them hold us, tenderly and gently opening and beginning to page through them, but only as they offer themselves to us. We need to look everyone and everything in the face and be amazed at the face of God looking back at us.

A close friend and follower of Francis of Assisi, St. Clare, wrote to a woman named Agnes in Prague in four beautiful letters. In one letter she instructs Agnes to place herself before the mirror of eternity. I invite us all to do that now as we open ourselves to *Lectio Divina*. I believe that our doxology would invite us to do the same thing, as we recognize that "as it was in the beginning is now and ever shall be." In other words, there is an absolutely amazing *now* about eternity.

Have you ever looked through a telescope and seen things that are distant suddenly brought into your presence? Perhaps it made you realize that all of what is there is already here. The spiritual truth is that, in Christ, in the Word, we are born into an inheritance that has been—and will be forever—God’s own reign. We are born to be one with all of creation in some profound way. It is the intimacy of the immensity of God.

It is “all in all.”

“It is already now.”

Franciscan Lectio is a practice in which you begin to actualize your connectedness with everything—your inherent and inherited union with the Divine. Religion has, at times, unfortunately tried to control a person’s journey. Lectio is a vast and singular doorway with a simple but necessary discipline. When we enter, whether through a leaf, a conversation with a friend, a verse from St. Paul’s letters, or a deep sadness, there is a unique openness to meaning, to understanding. Logic is making sense out of something; but in *logos*—the Word of God—what we have is the One who makes sense, the one who makes meaning. Our world is caught up in the logical order of things, but my hope is that our intellects are a springboard for going into *logos*. As most mystics know, authentic experience disturbs our ordering and we become somewhat disordered.

Eventually a new light comes on as we are brought into unity. We open our hearts to the conversion that is part of the habit and practice of Lectio—a conversion through reading the sacred cosmos: the Christ that is in everyone and every thing. We read the Word slowly—in one verse, one creature, one face, one journey, one song—as *one* cosmic story unfolding with grace as our guide.

PART I  
GAZE



READING THE WORD  
ON THE FACE OF CREATION

*“Gaze . . . look upon and follow the one  
who made himself contemptible for your sake.”*

— ST. CLARE OF ASSISI



*“In the beginning (in the beginning of time to say the least) there were the compasses. Whirling in void their feet traced out beginnings and endings, beginning and end in a single line. Wisdom danced also in circles for these were her kingdom. The sun spun, worlds whirled, the seasons came round, and all things went their rounds; but in the beginning, beginning and end were in one. And in the beginning was love. Love made a sphere, and all things grew within it. The sphere then encompassed beginnings and endings, beginning and end. Love had a compass whose whirling dance traced out a sphere of love in the void; in the center thereof  
rose a fountain.”*

— ROBERT LAX<sup>4</sup>



*“God speaks to each of us as he makes us,  
then walks with us silently out of the night.”*

— RAINER MARIA RILKE