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# Journey of the Heart

*A Way of Praying on the Gospels*

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ST. BEDE'S PUBLICATIONS  
Still River, Massachusetts

## Foreword

During the first thousand years in which Christian Fathers wrote about the ways of prayer, from Evagrius Ponticus in the fourth century to the dominating influence of scholasticism in the fourteenth, one of the favored means for summing up teaching on prayer was to employ four words: *lectio*, *meditatio*, *oratio*, and *contemplatio*. A literal English translation of these four words—reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation—does not adequately convey their significance in this context. *Lectio*, or *lectio divina* as the more common usage would have it, includes far more than reading.

Back in a period when most people could not read, the term rather connoted *receiving the divine word*, whether through personal reading, hearing the word read in the liturgical assembly, receiving it from a spiritual father, recalling it from one's own memory, seeing it depicted in fresco, icon or stained glass, acted out in the mystery play, or existentially expressed in creation—the sky, the land, the water, the bird, the tree. *Lectio* is a quiet receptive openness to hearing God speak through whatever media are aptly at hand. It is to receive the word of life.

*Meditatio* is allowing the word to come to life in us. More often in those early days it involved the repetition—mentally or with the lips—of a phrase of Scripture, repeated over and over again until it formed the heart. The Fathers

liked to use the example of the "clean animal": The cow goes out to the pasture and eats the fresh green clover (*lectio*), then it retires to the shade of a great oak, settles down, and regurgitates what it has collected, to chew it over and over (*meditatio*) till there is extracted from it the makings of rich, creamy milk (*oratio*). Through meditation a rational assent to the realities of divine presence and revelation is changed into a real assent, to use Cardinal Newman's happy distinction. We hear the word of God, and in faith, assent to it: "Yes, that is true." But through *meditatio*, the word forms our heart and being, it comes alive in us. Our whole being says, "Yes, that's it,"—a real assent.

When the word calls forth such a response from us, we are in prayer—*oratio*. Prayer always begins with God. He speaks first. He speaks the creation. He speaks each one of us into being. He speaks to us, revealing himself and his plan of love. When we truly hear—*lectio* and *meditatio*—it is time to respond—*oratio*. According as we hear, so we respond: adoration and praise in the face of who he is; thanksgiving and love in the face of whom he made us; repentance and reparation in the face of whom we have made ourselves.

At times our experience of him, of the reality of what is, of who he is, who we are, our relation, is so full that no words, thoughts, feelings or images are adequate. The only fitting response is that of our whole being. In silence, we are to him—communion—*contemplatio*. "Be still, and know that I am God."

This is the basic fabric of all Christian prayer, God has spoken—the eternal Word made incarnate—and we respond. No matter how simple or how complex our way may be, no matter how sophisticated the method we employ, our prayer is essentially this. All methods, all ritual, all symbols,

have their purpose in letting God's word to us evoke from us a total response.

Father Tom Kane, with a rich simplicity and directness, invites us to experience this. His very open sharing, as a man of faith and gentle love, invites us to take courage and hope to pursue a richer and fuller prayer life. Father wrote these pages as a very busy man, teaching several college courses, providing guidance to innumerable students, serving a busy parish. In the face of such witness, our pleas of being too busy to make time to sit down and listen to the Lord come across as quite hollow. We find the time to do the things we deem important: eat, sleep, share with loved ones, even watch TV. Who loves us more and is more to be loved than the Lord? What is more important—the physical life sustained by food and rest, or the eternal life of our spirit that needs to be nourished and rested in prayer?

Father writes in the spirit of the ancient Christian tradition, but he writes as a man of *today*. He makes the fruit of the Christian heritage readily available. He writes for the students he teaches and guides—quite ordinary, confused and searching American teenagers. He writes for the people he serves in the parish—mothers and fathers, grandparents and singles, those who come each Sunday to celebrate Mass with him and listen to his homilies, who catch him in the sacristy or come to the rectory to pour out their troubles, share their joys, seek advice. Father shares here his own way of prayer, his own life in the Lord, which has made him a most loving and loved spiritual father and friend. We are grateful to him.

M. Basil Pennington, O.C.S.O.

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PRINTED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

*Nihil Obstat:*

Rev. John A. Alesandro, S.T.L., J.C.D.

*Censor Librorum*

October 22, 1979

*Imprimatur:*

Most Reverend John R. McGann, D.D.

*Bishop of Rockville Center*

October 24, 1979

The Nihil obstat and Imprimatur are official declarations  
that the manuscript is free of doctrinal or moral error.

**Acknowledgement:**

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COVER DESIGN BY ANTHONY MAGGIORE, OCSO

Second Printing, March 1983

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Kane, Thomas S., 1942-  
Journey of the heart.

1. Prayer. 2. Bible. N.T. Gospels—Criticism, interpre-  
tation, etc. I. Title.

BV210.2.K33

242'.5

81-5278

ISBN 0-932506-13-5

AACR2