

Lectio Divina

**Praying with the Word
Of God**



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Lectio Divina

I. Introduction

Lectio Divina is a devout and prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture. It can be done by an individual or by a group of faithful people. This inspired reading can only be done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who moves our beings into attentive reading, meditation, prayer and contemplation.

The experience of the Church throughout the centuries teaches us a very important lesson: A prayer that erupts from a meditated reading of Scripture elevates our soul to the realm of contemplation and true living virtue.

We live in a society in which there is no time for contemplation or prayer. Very seldom are we taught how to pray, and most people are not acquainted with a specific method of prayer.

Thus, it is my desire to share with you the invaluable treasure of our millenary catholic monastic tradition, the so-called Lectio Divina. I hope it may help you in your search for happiness and inner peace, for prayer is like our mother's breast, which nurtures our lives with the milk of faith, hope and love.¹



¹ "The soul is fed each day with Lectio Divina" (Jerome, *in Tit III*, 9); "Intent on the food of Lectio Divina" (Ambrose, PL 15, 1681b); "Lectio Divina raises us up... that you may cultivate the fear of God through Lectio Divina and serious conversation" (St. Augustine, PL 38,778; 9, 87).

From time immemorial monks of the different monasteries in Europe have developed ways to bring our soul into the beauty of intimacy with God. Nonetheless, they never conceived it as an easy task but a disciplinary one. For example Smaragdus commenting on St. Benedict's rule teaches us:

"For those who practice it, the experience of *Lectio Sacra* sharpens perception, enriches understanding, rouses from sloth, banishes idleness, orders life, corrects bad habits, produces salutary weeping and draws tears from contrite hearts...curbs idle speech and vanity, awakens longing for Christ and the heavenly homeland. It must always be accompanied by prayer and intimately joined with it, for we are cleansed by prayer and taught by reading. Therefore, whoever wishes to be with God at all times must pray often and read often, for when we pray it is we who speak with God, but when we read it is God who speaks with us. Every seeker of perfection advances in reading, prayer and meditation. Reading enables us to learn what we do not know, meditation enables us to retain what we have learned, and prayer enables us to live what we have retained. Reading Sacred Scriptures confers on us two gifts: it makes the soul's understanding keener, and after snatching us from the world's vanities, it leads us to the love of God."²

II. Objective Qualities of *Lectio Divina*

Before we begin our journey through meditated reading of Scripture, it is necessary to explain the qualities of the Book containing Sacred Scriptures:

a) The Bible contains God's Revelation to us, that is why, the word contained in it, is acknowledged as God's Word.

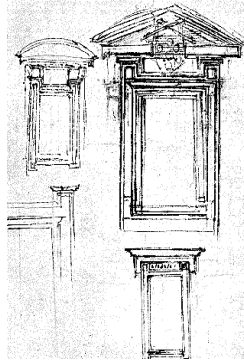
b) The Church has always venerated Holy Scriptures as if they were Christ's Body, for in the celebration of the Eucharist the Church has never ceased to partake and to give to the faithful the Bread of Life offered at the table of the Word and the Table of the Eucharistic Sacrifice (DV 1).

c) The Majesty of Scripture must be revered at all times. Many adjectives have always been used to describe in all reverence what

² Smaragdus, *Comm. In Reg. S. Benedicti*, 4,56 (PL 102, 784).

Scripture really is for the Church: Divina Pagina, Sacra Pagina, Pagina Coeleste, and Pagina Aeterna.

d) Scripture is a living book, is Christ Himself. St. John calls him the Word Made Flesh (Jn 1:14). Therefore, reading Scripture is entering into the Tent of God's very own intimacy; it is to engage in a date with our Lord; but most of all it is to be healed with his tender words.



e) St. John of The Cross, in his poem *The Dark Night of the Soul*³ illustrates the encounter of the soul with Jesus in the Tent of God's intimacy:

“...Upon that lucky night
In secrecy, inscrutable to sight
I went without discerning
And with no other light
Except for that which in my heart was burning...

Lost to myself I stayed
My face upon my lover having laid
From all endeavour ceasing:
And all my cares releasing
Threw them amongst the lilies there to fade.”³

³ Campell, R., *Poems of St. John of the Cross* (New York 1967) 11-13.

f) In Scripture we find God's Power to live our daily lives according to God's will. The Dynamis of God's Word manifests itself in us through the gifts, which he gives us abundantly.⁴

g) Finally, last but not least, we must keep in mind that even though Scripture is God's Word, one can never pretend to reach God ontologically. He will always remain an inexhaustible Mystery to us.⁵



III. Subjective Qualities of Lectio Divina

Just as it was important to say a word on the Excellency of Scripture, so it is equally important to dedicate sometime to describe

⁴ “But the one who joins himself to the Lord is one spirit *with Him*” 1Co 6:17; “And hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.” Ro 5:5; “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*. But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good. For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another *various* kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.” 1Co 12:4-11.

⁵ “How amazing is the profundity of your words! We are confronted with a superficial meaning that offers easy access to the unlettered; yet how amazing their profundity, o my God how amazingly deep they are! To look into that depth makes me shudder, but it is the shudder of awe, the trembling of love.” St. Augustine, *Conf.* XII, 14,7.

attitudes and inner dispositions needed to meet our goal. There are certain virtues we must ask the Holy Spirit to pour upon us:

a) Purity of Heart, in order to dispose our soul to receive God's Word.

b) Faith, so that we may open our hearts to His Word.

c) Humility, to accept His teachings and consequently change our sinful ways.

d) Recollection, in order to bring our selves into silence from within, so to be able to grasp and understand His message.

e) Perseverance and diligence, so that we may be able to establish a habit of prayer and meditations.

f) Wisdom, that allows us to glimpse the mystery of God and the Salvation He wants for us.

g) Commitment, to keep ourselves in contact with the Divine talk that nurtures our links with Him and our beloved ones.



IV. Three Steps to make Lectio Divina.

Let us begin by quoting from Lk 11:9 a start key text: "And I say to you, ask, and it shall be given to you; seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you." From this quote we are going to extract the three steps of a good Lectio, please try to keep it in mind in order to fully understand the different aspects of this method.

A. First Step: *Invocatio Spiritus Sancti.*

"Ask and it shall be given to you." It is impossible to understand Scripture without pacifying the soul, without the animation of the Holy Spirit (Lk 24:36.45.49). Inner peace is only acquired when our

heart has reached a certain level of serenity and disposition (Lk 10:41; Mt 6; 6).

In this sense, a better invocation to the Holy Spirit would be one which is spontaneous and uniquely inspired in us by God. Nonetheless, to recite an existing invocation could be very helpful. We propose, among many, the following:

1. "Come Holy Ghost, Creator blest,
And in our hearts take up thy rest;
Come with thy grace and heavenly aid
To fill the hearts, which Thou has made.

O Comforter, to thee we cry,
Thou heavenly gift of God most high;
Thou fount of life,
And fire of love,
And sweet anointing from above.

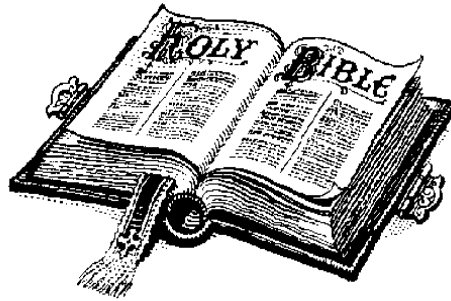
O Holy Ghost, through thee alone,
Know we the Father and the Son;
Be this our firm unchanging creed,
That Thou dost from them both proceed.

Praise we the Lord, Father and Son,
And Holy Spirit with them one;
And may the Son on us bestow
All gifts that from the Spirit flow." Amen.

2. "Come, o Holy Spirit! Enlighten my understanding in order to know your commands; strengthen my heart against the snares of the enemy; enkindle my will. I have heard your voice, and I do not want to harden my heart and resist, saying, "Later... tomorrow." Right now! Lest there be no tomorrow for me.

Oh Spirit of truth and of wisdom, Spirit of understanding and of counsel, Spirit of joy and of peace, I want what you want, because you want it, as you want it, when you want it."

3. "Come, Holy Spirit, give me the perfect charity, the facility to understand, the memory to retain, and the heart to apprehend in order to allow myself to be thought by your precepts and thus penetrate with devotion into the Mysteries of Holy Scripture."



B. Second Step: Lectio

"Seek, and you shall find; knock, and it shall be opened to you." The Lectio itself consists of four movements. Each verb in our quote illustrates a movement.

1. Seek by reading Scripture (Lectio).

The first movement is to read attentively the Word of God, trying to discover in it all its richness. We must read the Word of God with the heart and not just with our mind, so that the Word may become alive in us. In order to do this more effectively we should reach the more comfortable position so to avoid any kind of distraction. It would be fitting to write that which one grasps from the text: Let us propose the format: CCT

Characters	Circumstances	Teachings
I try to know who is who, or what each person is in the reading.	I try to make a list of the events: When, How, Where, and Why?	I try to grasp the main teaching of the reading. What does it say?



2. **Find** by meditating Scripture (Meditatio).

The second movement is the reflection on the meaning of the text. Meditation is done with the Word still hot, resounding in our hearts. It is a process in which we wonder about the content of what has been read. At this moment we try to be part of the story and interact with the characters and the circumstances.⁶ Let us propose the format: **AAC**

Assimilation	Association	Correlation
What does the text say to me? I try to make a list of all teachings that have made an impact in me.	I associate the message with my life and try to find the challenges the text is making on me.	I try to further document my findings using parallels in Scripture, or any other source such as Commentaries



⁶ St. Gregory Nazianzene makes an analogy between the Word of God and the Easter Lamb: “First of all, it must be roasted in order to consume it completely, but also by doing so it helps to eliminate all “grease” or superfluous thinking. Thus, what is left is the pure essence. Secondly, it must be chewed and digested in order to make it a true spiritual digestion.” (PG 45, 16, 644).

3. **Knock** by praying (Oratio).

The third movement is prayer. We must engage in a colloquium with God. His message has touched us from within and so we are prompted to dialogue with him in thanksgiving. There, in the intimacy of our hearts we can engage in a date with him whom we know loves us deeply. Let us propose **RITT**

Recognize	Implore	Thank	Trust
We recognize with humility God's Greatness.	We implore His Mercy Towards us.	We thank with sincerity all his Bounty.	We abandon ourselves in trust to His cares.



4. **Open** by contemplating (Contemplatio).

The fourth movement is the passive act of contemplation. The most perfect prayer is that which yields into the inhabitation of God's grace. No words are needed, God has spoken, we have spoken, and it is time to relax and in deep awe marvel at His Majesty. Contemplatio involves remaining infatuated with the Word, letting our entire senses and feelings freeze, to focus on the piercing fire of His Love. Let us propose the following format: **CCT**

Contemplate	Comprehend	Taste
The Mystery of God's Love The Incarnation, Passion, Death, Resurrection and glorification of our Lord Jesus.	That all our lives are part of His plan of Salvation. That He loves us deeply, despite our errors and sins.	We have been brought to taste God's peace and joy. Therefore we sit back and enjoy the beauty of his gifts, the soothing of his healing power.



C. Third Step: Praise (Laudatio).

We come to an end just as we started, with a prayer of praise and thanksgiving for all we have experience in our session. Our Lectio will prompt us to make a spontaneous prayer, but if not, do not worry, it takes time, practice and much Grace to be able to pray spontaneously. Just as with the *invocatio*, let us suggest two existing Praises:

1. "Bestow upon us, Oh Lord, thy grace into our hearts, that we may do thy will by witnessing to Jesus Christ in our daily lives. And grant us thy saving power, to overcome temptation and into thy glory forever be." Amen.

2. Song of the soul (John of the Cross).

“Oh flame of love so living,
How tenderly you force
To my soul’s inmost core your fiery probe!
Since now you’ve no misgiving,
End it, pursue your course
And for our sweet encounter tear the robe!

...What peace, with love enwreathing,
You conjure to my breast
Which only you your dwelling place may call
While with delicious breathings
In glory, grace, and rest,
So daintily in love you make me fall!”



V. Conclusion

The purpose of reading Sacred Scripture is to nourish our faith with the words and deeds of our Lord Jesus Christ.⁷ The purpose of meditating on Sacred Scripture is to bring that nourished faith to perfection by bringing our lives to God’s love. Finally, the purpose of

⁷ “Titubabit fides si divinarum Scripturam, vacillat auctoritas,” Faith hesitates if it doubts on the authority of Sacred Scriptures (St. Augustine PL 34,35); “In Scripturis discimus Christum, in Scripturis discimus Ecclesiam,” In Scripture we learn about Christ, in Scripture we learn about the Church (St. Augustine PL 33, 401); “Ignoratio Scripturarum, ignoratio Christi est,” To ignore Scripture is to ignore Christ (St. Jerome PL 24,17).

God's love is to bring all his children into the Tent of His heavenly dwelling.⁸

Theologians call this process as "divinization," for we are called to become like God, and to share in his divine qualities.⁹

But this process takes time. It is a lifetime endeavour, in which The Holy Spirit within our souls will take us to that vast ocean of living waters, to God's dwelling place.

There in his presence, He will speak to us, perhaps very subtle, imperceptible almost, but sweet enough to brighten our days. He then, will seduce our lives by feeding our souls with The Bread of Angels. He will heal our wounds with his saving Power and restore our peace.

Ultimately, He will transform us into the likeness of his only Begotten Son and we shall live forever in his presence.¹⁰

We hope that these humble meditations may help you to engage yourself in a serious prayer life and eventually, to help you live with a better understanding of our human nature and our mission in this world.

Praying with the Word of God has been the turning point for many saints in our Catholic Tradition, and so, praying with the Word of God is a road to holiness. God's footprints mark, not an easy road, but certainly a road we can all trust.

VI. Lexicon

Adoration: it is the first attitude of man acknowledging that he is a creature before his Creator. Adoration is homage of the spirit to the King of Glory, respectful silence in the presence of the ever-greater God. Adoration of the thrice-holy and sovereign God of love blends with humility and gives assurances to our supplications (CCE 2628).

⁸ Eph 1: 3-6.9.1; Ro 8:28-30. Quia fecisti nos ad Te; et inquietum cor nostrum donec requiescat in te," For you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you (St. Augustine, *Liber Conf.* 1:1).

⁹ "The only Son of God wanting us to partake in his divinity, he assumed our nature. He became man in order to make us gods" (St. Thomas Aq. *Opusc.* 57; 1-4; St. Basil PG 32, 107-110).

¹⁰ "For your faithful people life is changed, not ended. When the body of our earthly dwelling lie in death we gain an everlasting dwelling place in heaven" Roman Missal, *Preface of Christian Death I.*

Apophatic: is the Via Negativa, emphasizes the radical difference between God and Creatures. God is best reached, therefore, by negation, forgetting, and unknowing, in a darkness of mind without the support of concepts, images, and symbols. Examples of this school of prayer are the writings of St. John of the Cross, and Teresa of Avila.

Blessing: is the basic movement of Christian prayer: it is an encounter between God and man. In blessing, God's gift and man's acceptance of it are united in dialogue with each other. Two fundamental forms express this movement: our prayer ascends in the Holy Spirit through Christ to the Father - we bless him for having blessed us; it implores the grace of the Holy Spirit that descends with humility and gives assurance to our supplications (CCE 2626-2627).

Contemplation: is nothing else than a close sharing between friends; it means taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us (Theresa of Ávila). Contemplative prayer seeks Jesus in order to quench our hunger and thirst of love. In this inner prayer we can still meditate, but our attention is fixed on the Lord Himself (CCE 2709).

Intercession: is a prayer of petition, which leads us to pray as Jesus did. He is the one intercessor with the Father on behalf of all men, especially sinners. The Holy Spirit intercedes for us and intercedes for the saints according to the will of God. The intercession of Christians recognizes no boundaries: for all men, kings, persecutors, for the salvation of those who reject the Gospel, for enemies, and friends, etc. (CCE 2634-2636).

Kataphatic: is the Via Affirmativa, emphasizes the similarity that exists between God and creatures. Because God can be found in all things, the affirmative way recommends the use of concepts, images and symbols as a way of contemplating God. Examples of this school of prayer are the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatious, *Le Milieu Divin* of Teilhard de Chardin. It would seem that for psychological and theological reasons, the apophatic mystic experiences, expresses, and emphasizes more the dissimilarity; the kataphatic emphasizes the

similarity. Nevertheless, both are orthodox ways of mystically reaching God, and one type of mysticism always contains elements from the other type. Any genuine Christian mysticism must hold the above similarity/dissimilarity distinctions together in a creative tension.

Meditation: is above all a quest, in which our mind seeks to understand the why and how of the Christian life, in order to adhere and respond to what the Lord is asking. The required attentiveness is difficult to sustain, so we are helped usually by Holy Scripture, Icons, spiritual writings, creation and daily life. There are as many and varied methods of meditations as there are masters. Christians owe it to themselves to develop the desire to meditate regularly, lest they become barren soil. But a method is only a guide; the important thing is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one way of prayer: Christ Jesus (CCE 2705-2707).

Praise: is a form of prayer that recognizes most immediately that God is God. It lauds God for his own sake and gives him glory, quite beyond what he does, but simply because he is. It makes us to share in the blessed happiness of loving God here on earth before seeing him in glory. By praise, the Spirit is joined to our spirits to bear witness that we are children of God (CCE 2639).

Prayer: is the rising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God. God tirelessly calls each person to this mysterious encounter with Himself. Prayer unfolds throughout the whole history of salvation as a reciprocal call between God and man. The prayer of Abraham and Jacob is the example of trust in God's faithfulness. The prayer of Moses responds to the living God's initiative for the salvation of his people. The prayer of the People of God flourished in the shadow of the dwelling place of God's presence on earth, the Ark of the Covenant and the Temple, under the guidance of their shepherds, especially King David and the prophets. The Psalms constitute the masterwork of prayer in the Old Testament. Prayed and fulfilled in Christ, the Psalms are an essential and permanent element of the prayer of the Church (CCE 2558-2597).

Jesus' filial prayer is the perfect model of prayer in the New Testament. Often done in solitude and in secret, the prayer of Jesus

involves a loving adherence to the will of the Father even to the Cross and an absolute confidence in being heard. In his teaching, Jesus instructs his disciples to pray with a purified heart, with lively and persevering faith, and with filial bonding. He calls them to vigilance and invites them to present their petitions to God in his name. The prayers of the Virgin Mary, in her *Fiat* and *Magnificat*, are characterized by the generous offering of her whole being in faith (CCE 2598-2622).

On the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the disciples, gathered in one place. In the first community of Jerusalem, believers devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and the prayers (CCE 2623-2624).

Petition: is a prayer where we express awareness of our relationship with God. We are creatures who are not our own beginning, not the masters of adversity, and not our own last end. We are sinners who as Christians know that we have tuned away from our father. Our petition is already a turning back to him (CCE 2629).

Thanksgiving: is the prayer that characterizes the Church which, in celebrating the Eucharist, reveals and becomes more fully what she is. The thanksgiving of the members of the Body participates in that of their Head, Christ Jesus. Thanksgiving is recognition of God's magnificent providence, and at the same time is humbling experience of self-awareness that everything we are and own, has been received freely from God (CCE 2637-2638).

Vocal prayer: is how, through his Word, God speaks to man. By words, thoughts or voices, our prayer takes flesh. Vocal prayer is an essential element of the Christian life. The need to involve the senses in the interior prayer corresponds to a requirement of our human nature. We are body and spirit, and we experience the need to translate our feelings externally. We must pray with our whole being to give all power possible to our supplication. Vocal prayer because it is external and so thoroughly human, is the form of prayer most accessible to groups. Thus vocal prayer becomes an initial form of contemplative prayer (CCE 2700-2704).



**Saint Joseph,
teach us to pray to thy son Jesus.**

VII. Practical ideas on prayer

What is prayer in essence?

1. Prayer is first and foremost a gift from God.
2. Prayer is not an act of our will, nor a mental exercise.
3. We pray because of God and not because of us.
4. We do not know how to pray or what to ask in prayer.
5. Since our Baptism we have received the gifts of faith, hope and love out of which all prayer is possible.
6. Sometimes, in order to increment our desire to pray, God waits to respond to our request. And after we have learned to trust in Him, He gives us what we need.
7. Sometimes God awards us what we are asking without letting us know we have it. God gives in effect but not necessarily in affect.
8. At times, God grants us the gift we are asking along with the feeling of it (call it spiritual candies or real piñatas). But even then, more important than the gift or the feeling is God Himself, the Giver of both.
9. Finally, sometimes God just simply does not grant us what we ask in prayer, not because he takes pleasure in our indigence, but rather because that which we are asking is not convenient for our souls and eternal salvation.

How to pray?

1. Every prayer must begin by asking God for the gift of prayer.
 2. Then, and only then, after we have received this precious gift, we can begin our prayer, starting with a vocal prayer: We dialogue and conference with God. He speaks through daily events, through others and through his Sacred Word. We answer in praise, thanksgiving, petition and intercession.

3. Our words are not important when compared to God's love. Sometimes words are not enough to express what we want. And because God is who and what we want, words must always be subordinated to the love of God. He just wants us to be there...

4. Efficacy of our prayer does not depend on our feelings or temperament for it will mean that God is powerless when we are down. Prayer's efficacy depends exclusively on the Holy Spirit who inspires and sustains our prayer from within.

5. A good prayer leads the soul into contemplation and consequently to love. Benedictine monks use two mantras that illustrate this path: *ora et labora* (pray and work) and *carpe diem* (seize the day). When contemplating the Cross of our Lord Jesus Christ we see that there are two axes: one being horizontal, the other being vertical. The Vertical axle elevated to God, points out our need to be in the presence of God always, by contemplating in awe His Mercy and Love. The Horizontal axle is an indicator that we must embrace our neighbor in love and forgiveness (Our Father).

6. But how do we know if our prayer is authentic? The following are some criteria to help our discernment on prayer's effectiveness:

a) Peace: if our prayer produces inner and lasting peace, that is, if there are no burdens pinching our consciences, it means our prayer was authentic.

b) Joy: following that inner peace, the true prayer leads into a burst of joy and thanksgiving to acknowledge God's presence in our lives.

c) Virtue: a true prayer leads to a steadfast growth of virtues in our lives. Virtues are God's gifts and so an effective prayer evokes a desire to grow in those virtues. Among many, this is a list of most needed

virtues in our Christian lives: **Faith, Hope, Love**, Purity, Chastity, Obedience, Empathy, Wisdom, Devotion, Endurance, Docility, Austerity, Simplicity, Dedication, forgiveness, objectiveness, expediency, solitude, fidelity, commitment, understanding, happiness, patience, audacity, asceticism, generosity, humility, concern, prayer, communion, etc.

4. Finally, the last criteria flows from virtue. It is the ultimate expression of our Christian life, *charitas*: i.e., Love. Our prayer is proven effective and well done when it brings us to help, to assist those in need (1 Co 12-13).

When should we pray?

1. At all times each one should find the best spot at home, and find the schedule that best suits his or her needs, in order to engage in a disciplinary method to the beauty of prayer.

2. There are moments that require extra prayer time, do not hesitate to take that time off to pray, you will need it later.

3. The private prayer leads us to communal prayer. In the Eucharist we find the sublime expression of community (ecclesial) prayer. We can attend the Eucharist for we have prayed before, we attend the Eucharist for we know our spiritual life flows from the gifts of the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ.

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Mary, Mother of the Church, pray for us!

“Mary becomes Mother because of her assent, in which she lets the Word spoken by the Angel become alive in her through the Holy Spirit. In her assent itself grace was visible as God’s question which she might answer. Now that she is a mother, her pregnancy has become a sign and pledge of the grace developing in her as God’s answer.”

Adrienne Von Speyer, *Handmaid of the Lord* (San Francisco 1985) 34.