

THE SYNOD IN ROME:
ON THE WORD OF GOD IN THE MISSION AND LIFE OF THE CHURCH

These next couple of weeks will continue the work of the Synod of Bishops on this important topic, and I think a word or two about the Synod itself and its operations would be useful.

The Synod is different from an Ecumenical Council in a number of ways. It does not make decisions on a wide range of pastoral and doctrinal issues. Rather, it offers consultation to the Pope on a single overall topic. The number of bishops is also much smaller—perhaps only 10% of all the world’s prelates are part of the Synod, whereas for a Council every bishop is invited. There will be no “Synod documents” as such, but there will almost certainly be an “Apostolic Exhortation” written by the Pope, in which he incorporates some of the themes presented to him by the Synod as a result of their discussions. There is only one “session” of the Synod, which is this 3-week period; Councils might have several (Vatican II had 5 sessions over a period of 3 years).

One dimension of the *instrumentum laboris* (working document) which is the Synod’s starting point is its highlighting the meaning and value of *lectio divina*, the prayerful reading of Scripture. The document encourages the renewal of this special form of prayer, and no doubt it will be embraced by the bishops and the Holy Father as well. But what is it, in fact?

Many of us read (skim, really) a newspaper article to grab a fact (or factoid) here and a figure there; we scan headlines and might dip into the first few sentences of the item and stop if it doesn’t interest us. Students might read more intensely (especially if there is a test coming up), but often speed is important because of the sheer quantity of reading involved for all one’s classes.

Lectio divina (spiritual reading) is the opposite of these. It is rooted in a monastic spirituality that says we have one purpose in this life, and that is to live so as to be prepared for the next (eternal) life. So we can move slowly and lovingly and not worry about being “productive” in the sense we take it these days. Monks could work on illuminated manuscripts and spend months on a single ornamented capital letter; if they were to die before the manuscript was completely copied, another monk would take over. What is important is to do the illuminating, the copying, with the energy of love.

The approach to the Bible is the same in *lectio divina*. The issue is not to read the entirety of, say, the Gospel of St. John or the Letter to the Hebrews in one sitting. It is instead to read perhaps no more than 3-4 verses—quietly, lovingly, with listening hearts—and then to sit with them and allow them to speak to the heart. A few verses might make for an hour of prayerful attention.

We are all far too often running from one thing to another (don’t I know it?!). *Lectio divina* encourages us to slow down and smell the roses of the Bible. Are you open to the possibility?