

A Lonergan Institute Seminar St Anselm's Abbey

Using Parables to Develop Moral Insights into
Political Philosophy



Incorporating the use of Parables into Policy Decisions...

What is an Economist?

“The master-economist must possess a rare combination of gifts He must be mathematician, historian, statesman, philosopher—in some degree. He must understand symbols and speak in words. He must contemplate the particular, in terms of the general, and touch abstract and concrete in the same flight of thought. He must study the present in the light of the past for the purposes of the future. No part of man's nature or his institutions must be entirely outside his regard. He must be purposeful and disinterested in a simultaneous mood, as aloof and incorruptible as an artist, yet sometimes as near to earth as a politician.”

— John Maynard Keynes

Definition of Parable

Parable is a [figure of speech](#), which presents a [short story](#), typically with a [moral](#) lesson at the end. You often have heard stories from your elders, such as *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, and *All is Vanity*. These are parables, because they teach you a certain moral lesson. Parable is, in fact, a Greek word, *parable*, which means “[comparison](#).” It is like a succinct [narrative](#), or a universal truth that uses [symbolism](#), [simile](#), and [metaphor](#), to demonstrate the moral lesson intended to be taught.

Like [analogy](#), we find the use of parables in [verse](#) and [prose](#), specifically in religious texts, such as the *Upanishad* or the *Bible*



George Washington: “I cannot tell a lie”

What is Lectio Divina?

Lectio Divina is a traditional monastic spiritual practice that combines scripture and a form of contemplative prayer

Its Origin

Lectio Divina as a term has been present within the Christian tradition since at least the time of Origen (190ce), though the meaning has varied somewhat over time. Origen used the term to refer to a prayerful (probably contemplative) reading of scripture with a desire to discern the hidden meaning. For later users, such as Ambrose, Augustine, and Benedict, the term was used in a similar manner – referring to a prayerful, contemplative reading of scripture in the hope that God will reveal himself in a deeper way.

In the twelve century, a Carthusian monk and prior named Guigo II developed a four-step process that eventually established the pattern for the process we know as *Lectio Divina* today. As he said in his book *The Ladder for Monks- A Letter on the Contemplative Life*:

“One day while I was occupied with manual labor I began to reflect on man’s spiritual work, and suddenly four steps for the soul came into my reflection: reading, meditation, prayer, contemplation. This is the ladder for monks by which they are raised from earth to heaven.”

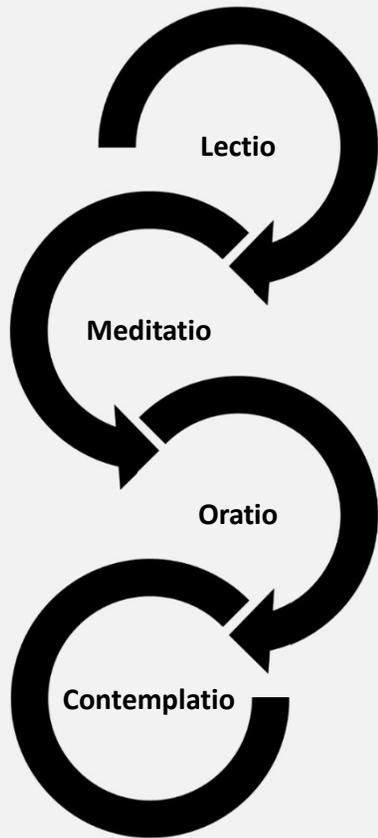
[Lectio Divina and Guigo’s Ladder for Monks | CenterForFaithAndEnterprise](#)



The Ladder of Divine Ascent icon showing monks ascending to Jesus in Heaven, 12th century, Saint Catherine's Monastery.

What is Lectio Divina?

The 4 Rungs of the Ladder



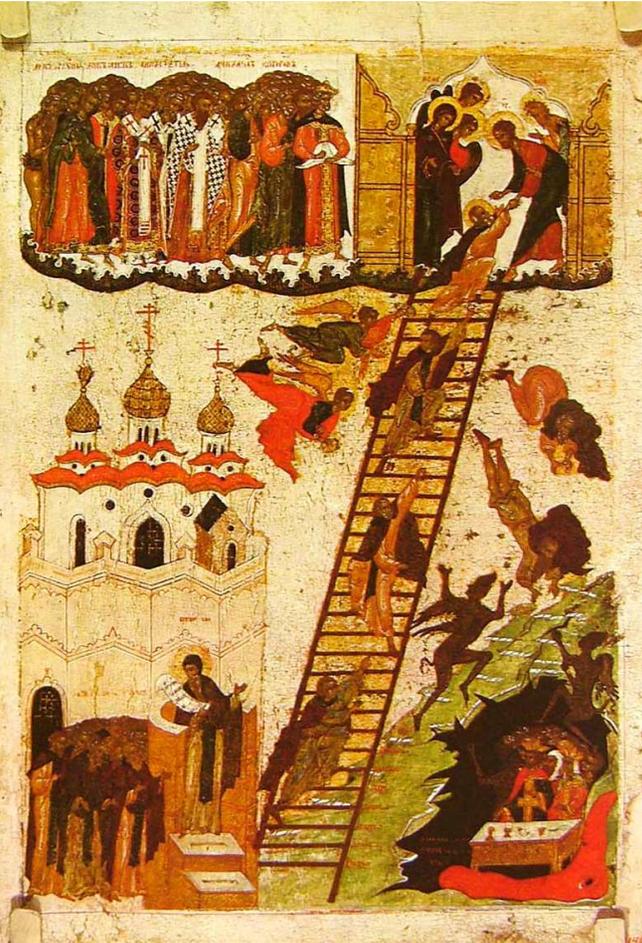
Reading (*Lectio*): The passage of scripture is read in its literal or natural sense, without applying theological or historical presuppositions.

Meditating (*Meditatio*): By meditation, we mean to ponder the passage and consider its lessons and meaning for our lives. This is different from what we usually think of as meditation and is a more analytical process. The analysis is not, however, focused on issues of historicity or dogma but rather on the meaning of the passage for the participant.

Prayer (*Oratio*): In this step, we set aside the analysis and the cognitive activity of the second step and turn to God in prayer. Ideally the second stage will have informed our prayer in some manner, leading us to ask for guidance, resolution, or perhaps something else. By turning our attention towards God, and listening, this step also prepares us for the final stage.

Contemplation (*Contemplatio*): In this stage, we let go of all thoughts and images and just rest in God.

What is Lectio Divina?



“Reading seeks for the sweetness of a blessed life, meditation perceives it, prayer asks for it, contemplation tastes it. Reading, as it were, puts food whole into the mouth, meditation chews it and breaks it up, prayer extracts its flavor, contemplation is the sweetness itself which gladdens and refreshes. Reading works on the outside, meditation on the pith [soft inner part of a feather or a hair; the essential part, core, heart]: prayer asks for what we long for, contemplation gives us delight in the sweetness which we have found.”

--from *The Ladder of Monks* by Guigo

Russian Icon. Novgorod, 15th Century: The Vision of Venerable John of the Ladder

Using Parables to Understand Income Inequality...

The Parable of the Dishonest Steward (Luke Ch16)

- 1 Then he also said to his disciples, "A rich man had a steward who was reported to him for squandering his property.
- 2 He summoned him and said, 'What is this I hear about you? Prepare a full account of your stewardship, because you can no longer be my steward.'
- 3 The steward said to himself, 'What shall I do, now that my master is taking the position of steward away from me? I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg.
- 4 I know what I shall do so that, when I am removed from the stewardship, they may welcome me into their homes.'
- 5 He called in his master's debtors one by one. To the first he said, 'How much do you owe my master?'
- 6 He replied, 'One hundred measures of olive oil.' He said to him, 'Here is your promissory note. Sit down and quickly write one for fifty.'
- 7 Then to another he said, 'And you, how much do you owe?' He replied, 'One hundred kors* of wheat.' He said to him, 'Here is your promissory note; write one for eighty.'
- 8 And the master commended that dishonest steward for acting prudently

Lectio Discussion: What did the parable mean to you?



Using Parables to Understand Income Inequality...

Parable of the Rich Fool (Luke Ch12)

16 Then he told them a parable. “There was a rich man whose land produced a bountiful harvest.

17 He asked himself, ‘What shall I do, for I do not have space to store my harvest?’

18 And he said, ‘This is what I shall do: I shall tear down my barns and build larger ones. There I shall store all my grain and other goods

19 and I shall say to myself, “Now as for you, you have so many good things stored up for many years, rest, eat, drink, be merry!”

20 But God said to him, ‘You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?’

21 Thus will it be for the one who stores up treasure for himself but is not rich in what matters to God.”



Lectio Discussion: What did the parable mean to you?

Using Parables to Understand Income Inequality...

The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke Ch16)

19 “There was a rich man who dressed in purple garments and fine linen and dined sumptuously each day. 20 And lying at his door was a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores 21 who would gladly have eaten his fill of the scraps that fell from the rich man’s table. Dogs even used to come and lick his sores. 22 When the poor man died, he was carried away by angels to the bosom of Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried, 23 and from the netherworld,* where he was in torment, he raised his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus at his side. 24 And he cried out, ‘Father Abraham, have pity on me. Send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, for I am suffering torment in these flames.’ 25 Abraham replied, ‘My child, remember that you received what was good during your lifetime while Lazarus likewise received what was bad; but now he is comforted here, whereas you are tormented 26 Moreover, between us and you a great chasm is established to prevent anyone from crossing who might wish to go from our side to yours or from your side to ours.’ 27 He said, ‘Then I beg you, father, send him to my father’s house, 28 for I have five brothers, so that he may warn them, lest they too come to this place of torment.’ 29 But Abraham replied, ‘They have Moses and the prophets. Let them listen to them.’ 30 He said, ‘Oh no, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.’ 31 Then Abraham said, ‘If they will not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded if someone should rise from the dead.’”

Lectio Discussion: What did the parable mean to you?



Using Parables to Understand Income Inequality

The Workers in the Vineyard (CH20)

- 1 “The kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out at dawn to hire laborers for his vineyard.
- 2 After agreeing with them for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard.
- 3 Going out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace,
- 4 and he said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard, and I will give you what is just.’
- 5 So they went off. [And] he went out again around noon, and around three o’clock, and did likewise.
- 6 Going out about five o’clock, he found others standing around, and said to them, ‘Why do you stand here idle all day?’
- 7 They answered, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You too go into my vineyard.’
- 8 “When it was evening the owner of the vineyard said to his foreman, ‘Summon the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and ending with the first.’
- 9 When those who had started about five o’clock came, each received the usual daily wage.
- 10 So when the first came, they thought that they would receive more, but each of them also got the usual wage.
- 11 And on receiving it they grumbled against the landowner,
- 12 saying, ‘These last ones worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us, who bore the day’s burden and the heat.’
- 13 He said to one of them in reply, ‘My friend, I am not cheating you.* Did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage?’
- 14 “Take what is yours and go. What if I wish to give this last one the same as you?
- 15 [Or] am I not free to do as I wish with my own money? Are you envious because I am generous?’
- 16 “Thus, the last will be first, and the first will be last.”



Lectio Discussion: What did the parable mean to you?

Using Parables to Understand Income Inequality...

The Parable of the Talents (Ch 25)

- 14^c “It will be as when a man who was going on a journey^{*} called in his servants and entrusted his possessions to them.
- 15To one he gave five talents;^{*} to another, two; to a third, one—to each according to his ability. Then he went away. Immediately
- 16the one who received five talents went and traded with them, and made another five.
- 17Likewise, the one who received two made another two.
- 18^{*} But the man who received one went off and dug a hole in the ground and buried his master’s money.
- 19After a long time the master of those servants came back and settled accounts with them.
- 20The one who had received five talents came forward bringing the additional five.^{*} He said, ‘Master, you gave me five talents. See, I have made five more.’
- 21^d His master said to him, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master’s joy.’
- 22[Then] the one who had received two talents also came forward and said, ‘Master, you gave me two talents. See, I have made two more.’
- 23His master said to him, ‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. Since you were faithful in small matters, I will give you great responsibilities. Come, share your master’s joy.’
- 24Then the one who had received the one talent came forward and said, ‘Master, I knew you were a demanding person, harvesting where you did not plant and gathering where you did not scatter; 25so out of fear I went off and buried your talent in the ground. Here it is back.’
- 26His master said to him in reply, ‘You wicked, lazy servant!^{*} So you knew that I harvest where I did not plant and gather where I did not scatter?
- 27Should you not then have put my money in the bank so that I could have got it back with interest on my return?
- 28Now then! Take the talent from him and give it to the one with ten.
- 29^e For to everyone who has, more will be given and he will grow rich; but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away.
- 30^{*} And throw this useless servant into the darkness outside, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth.’



Lectio Discussion: What did the parable mean to you?

Using Parables to Understand Income Inequality

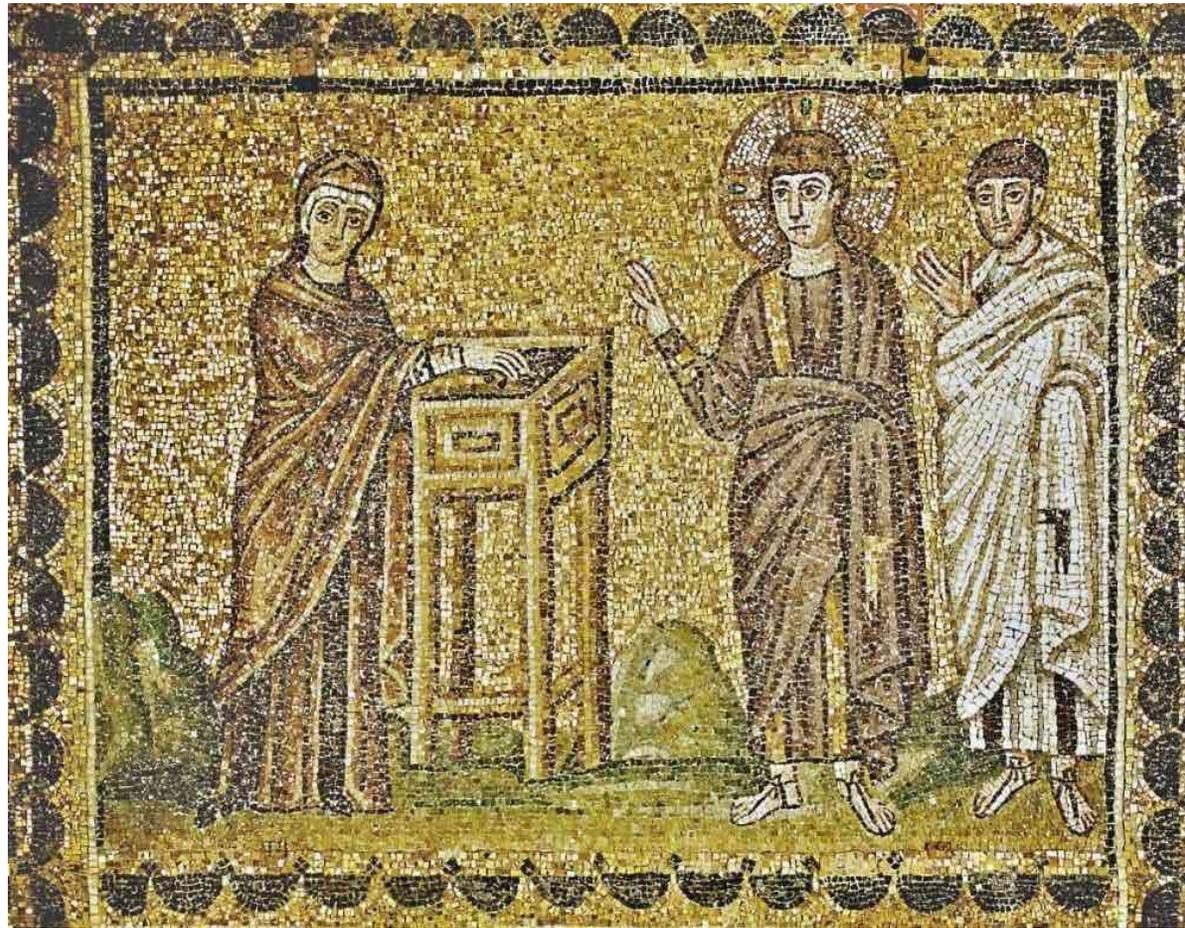
Parable of the Widow's Mite

¹ Looking up, he saw rich people putting their [offerings](#) into the treasury;

² and he noticed a poverty-stricken [widow](#) putting in two small coins,

³ and he said, 'I tell you truly, this poor [widow](#) has put in more than any of them;

⁴ for these have all put in money they could spare, but she in her [poverty](#) has put in all she had to live on.'



Lectio Discussion: What did the parable mean to you?

Summary and Conclusions

After reflecting on the parables, what are your final thoughts, conclusions?

How do those final thoughts or conclusions support or contradict the inherent values or assumptions found in what we would call our modern free enterprise system?

How do we apply these insights to economic policy or our approach to developing economic policy?

It is a citizen's or government's duty to serve the poor, or alleviate poverty, it is a priority for policy

Generosity, mercy, pride; we have duties and responsibilities to model in real life

Core belief in human dignity

Human rights based on Christian principles; "All men are created equal"

Start with human dignity

God ordains resource inequality, and we are called to be faithful to what we are given

God views us all as equal, then we have a duty to model that, then from there, we see inequality, the next responsibility is how do we act get to ensure justice

Equality of opportunity, Equal shot to win a scholarship

Sometimes there are clear courses of action that should be taken

Too easy to say steal from the rich and give to the poor, need to start with our own personal duties

The Golden Rule is an important policy principle

Sometimes it is hard to distinguish between good and evil; sometimes evil looks good and good looks evil; we should have caution because it is hard to make discriminating judgements and we would be wise to keep a certain amount of cautionary reserve in our judgement about a right course of action

The communitarian sense is important; If we respect individual rights, we will build up the community

Empathy and remember humility when we interact on a personal basis and engage these principles when we make policy

Equality before the law; equal access to upward mobility

Subsidiary is important

A belief in relations of community, problems with the idea of the rugged individualist

Some percentage of population exists where there is no way to make a "normal" living with dignity because they are not capable (E.g. mentally handicapped, drug addiction); so a solution of some kind is needed; community care for that segment will be needed

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