

IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION

Imaginative Prayer in the Ignatian Tradition

Ignatian contemplation (also known as imaginative contemplation) is a way of praying with Scripture using your imagination that was made popular by St. Ignatius and his *Spiritual Exercises*. Using all of your senses--sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell--you can more fully picture the events of a passage in your imagination. As you close your eyes, you can personally experience the story as it unfolds, like a movie playing on the screen of your "mind's eye". If you allow the Spirit to guide your imagination, the scenes can begin to take shape for you in ways that are more personal and powerful...not unlike what might happen when you get immersed in the events of a good book.

If you are imagining the story of the road to Emmaus in the gospel of Luke, for example, you might begin to notice little details you hadn't considered before and become more aware of what the disciples are experiencing. Maybe you see how dirty their feet are from the dust of the road...or sense how tired they must be in their old and worn-out sandals. Maybe you can feel the breeze blowing through the air and smell the scent of plants growing nearby. As you listen and walk along with them, maybe you hear their conversation with greater life. You might even experience the story as one of them. Maybe *you* are the one to speak to Jesus unknowingly as he joins you along the way...The possibilities are endless.

No matter what kind of imagination you have, Ignatian contemplation can help you be open to experiencing the events of Scripture more vividly and uniquely. By paying attention to your thoughts and feelings--as well as to how you experience and see the scene--it's possible to listen deeply for the voice of God in your own heart. If you become one of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, for instance, perhaps you might be moved to consider ways you're not recognizing God in your daily life. Or maybe Jesus is trying to tell you that he's with you in your suffering, however little you might feel or sense his presence at the time.

Often, this approach to praying with Scripture allows God to be with you in powerful and personal ways. As you allow the Spirit to guide your imagination, you may be surprised at how and where you are led. In particular, Ignatian contemplation may help you develop a deeper, more personal relationship with the person of Jesus. The prayer time traditionally ends with a "colloquy" or conversation with Jesus about what you've been thinking, feeling, and experiencing during your prayer period. Through these personal encounters with Jesus, you can begin to have more open, honest, and intimate time with him--both in speaking and in simply *being* with each other, helping your friendship to grow and deepen.

Ignatian contemplation may be an unfamiliar way of praying to you at first. But, with time and practice, it can become a more natural way of being with Jesus and of allowing God to move your imagination to speak to you more personally. Below are some common steps or components to this form of prayer. You may find them helpful in beginning to explore this way of praying for yourself.

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1. PREPARATION (5')

- I take a relaxed position with a straight back.
- I take 5-7 deep breaths, inhaling and exhaling fully.
- I make a gesture of reverence & humility to become aware of God who is already "here".
- I recall the last time I experienced God, peace, love...

2. PETITION FOR GRACE (1')

- I ask for the grace to direct my whole self toward God.

3. DESIRE (1')

- I desire to listen, let go, trust, experience love, etc...

4. PRAYER (15-25') (IMAGINE "AS IF I AM THERE")

- I read the passage several times and pick 2-3 points (images, phrases, thoughts, or ideas) that strike or "speak" to me.
- I let the points and passage stir my imagination. I put myself into the story: seeing the people, hearing the dialogue and engaging in the actions (*what do I see, hear, touch, smell?*). I let the story come alive as if I were there, experiencing what is happening. I stay with a point until I am satisfied and ready to move to the next point.
- I pay attention to what resonates or moves my *heart* (to any feelings, affects, memories, or desires that emerge as I contemplate). I remain where my attention is drawn...where I am touched at a deeper level, letting the insight permeate my experience.

3. COLLOQUY/CONVERSATION

- I end my prayer with a short, heartfelt conversation with God or Jesus, talking as to a friend, about what I just experienced.

(adapted from Michael Hansen SJ)