**Developing a Prayer Life**

***Gospel (Ignatian) Contemplation***

A cornerstone of Ignatian spirituality is using the imagination in praying with the Scriptures, especially praying scenes from the Gospel.

St. Ignatius’ imagination played a central role in his own conversion experience.

* As he convalesced in bed for months after being wounded in battle, he experienced alternating sets of daydreams and noticed the effects these daydreams had on his soul.
* Initially his daydreaming focused on winning the hand of a particular lady after his recovery, and these imaginings delighted him as he entertained them. As a result of reading a life of Christ and a book of the lives of the saints, the young Ignatius also daydreamed about following in the footsteps of St. Francis and St. Dominic, and these thoughts ignited his heart.
* With time, however, he noticed this key difference: while both sets of imaginings delighted him as he entertained them, when the vain and worldly daydreams stopped, he was left sad and dissatisfied, whereas the cessation of the holy dreams of imitating the saints left him joyful and peaceful.

People differ in their imaginative abilities, or at least in the kinds of imagination they have.

* Some can easily visualize in colorful detail an entire Gospel scene.
* Some have a vivid auditory imagination and can imagine whole conversations.
* Others do not see and hear so much but can feel the story and characters in ways hard to articulate.
* While some folks take to Ignatian contemplation more easily or naturally than others, we all have an imagination. If you can enjoy a good story, you have an imagination suitable for prayer!

Why is using our imaginative faculty a useful method of prayer?

* The words and actions of Jesus Christ are present for every person throughout salvation history as it unfolds, because they are the words and actions of a Person existing eternally. Christ can approach us today through what he once said and did in human history. The mysteries He lived in the flesh mysteriously preserve their reality and effectiveness in the risen and glorified Jesus.
* Repeated meditation on the historical words and deeds of Jesus as recorded in the Gospels produces an interior formation or knowledge, so that we can then imitate Christ in our lives today, in our present circumstances.
* In contemplating the mysteries of Christ’s life, I am invited to see, feel and savor all that He is: His words, actions, interior attitudes, confrontations, His way of fulfilling His mission. One must take a long, loving look at the Lord, resting in the mystery, letting it penetrate deeply into the heart. We see the Gospel persons, listen to what they say, and consider what they do.
* Engaging our imagination when approaching a biblical scene encourages us to move beyond mere abstract thinking *about* Jesus to encountering and experiencing him. The same Person, Jesus Christ, who interacted with human persons 2000 years ago—this same Person is risen and alive now, and continues to encounter each human being He has created, each disciple who follows him today.
* Gospel or Ignatian contemplation can help make the Jesus of the Gospels *our* Jesus, *my* Jesus. He does not remain simply a historical figure but relates to me as Lord, as Savior, as brother and as friend in a uniquely personal manner. In my imagination, Jesus may look at me, speak to me, and interact with me in ways that he doesn’t choose to do with others. I need not stay bound by the literal content of the Scripture text, for the same Holy Spirit who inspired the Bible now inspires my prayer so that it takes on a life of its own. Do not fear going beyond what a Gospel passage presents.
* Praying with our imagination allows us to get to know the Lord (and other Scriptural persons) in a way that mere Bible study or theological reflection cannot. Through it, Christ can reach places in our bodies, hearts and souls that the intellect alone won’t reach. Our feelings and our will can be deeply touched by imaginative prayer, and radical conversion and healing can sometimes happen more easily.

Our imagination can be fruitfully employed to pray over realities not recorded in the Gospels, such as Jesus’ hidden life.

* Jesus spent the bulk of his earthly life in Nazareth, humbly obedient to His earthly parents. They shared a home, they formed a family—the Holy Family.
* We might travel imaginatively to Nazareth, come to the house, and knock on the door. Who opens it to us? Perhaps the Blessed Mother invites you in for tea and conversation. You might join the family for a meal. Maybe it’s the Sabbath, and Jesus’ extended family is there so you get to meet some of them, sing at table with them, share a meal, then go to the roof with Jesus and Joseph—the flat roof of desert countries—and engage in conversation while watching the night sky.
* In our imagination, we can play with Jesus and his playmates in the village, doing so as a kid ourselves, or maybe playing with them from our present-day perspective as an adult. We can observe the boy Jesus and Joseph working on a project together in the carpenter shop, maybe even lend a hand. What are they creating together?
* We can talk a long walk with Jesus as a young adult in the beautiful Galilean countryside, so much like parts of California. Allow Him to share His dreams and aspirations, his worries and struggles, as a young man.
* Meditating on Jesus’ hidden life and on the harmonious, loving relations among the Holy Family can bring healing to hearts, especially if they have been wounded by our own family and childhood experiences. And who doesn’t carry at least some scars from those early, formative years?

Isn’t this imaginative prayer all just made-up fantasy or daydream rather than genuine prayer? How do I know it’s of God and not just simply of me?

* Trust that God gave you an imagination as part of your human nature for a reason
* Trust tradition: great saints have employed this method of prayer
* Discern the fruit: does this prayer lead to increased faith, hope and love? Does it increase our desire to know, love and follow Jesus?