



Imagination Prayer

IGNATIUS' FIVE SENSES OF THE IMAGINATION

Imagination prayer is shared experience with Jesus that is based on stories of Jesus from the Gospels and that draws on our use of empathy and visualization.

Imagination prayer is designed to help us experience being with Jesus. The fears and joys Jesus' contemporaries felt were true responses to his personality, his work, and his words (Matt 28:8). Walking with him allowed them to know his presence with intimacy and certainty (Luke 24:32). Ignatius of Loyola began his journey looking for that same encounter with Christ.

Christened Iñigo López (c. 1491–1556), Ignatius was born into a noble family in Basque, on the Spanish side of the border. As a younger son, his career options were limited. Another brother took the church job, so Iñigo entered the military. In 1521, during a French invasion of the city he was defending, a cannonball shattered his leg. His injury healed incorrectly and required surgery to re-break and set the bone and to shave the resulting bulge.

During his long confinement, Iñigo could not find any of the chivalry books he preferred, so he read the only works at hand, a life of Christ and a legends of the saints. Unable to pursue the usual diversions of a military man, he pondered his encounter with death and considered his lifestyle in light of these saints. By the time his leg was healed, he had committed himself to a saint's path (1 Cor 1:2).

He confessed his sins, donated his fine clothes to the poor, and took vows of poverty and chastity. Keeping vigil one night in a chapel, he dedicated even his weapons and his knightly skills to the service of God. For a year, he lived in a Dominican priory as a monk and practiced a severe asceticism, but none of this seemed to minister Jesus' presence to him. Despair and suicide often tempted him instead.

Still, he persevered. Following the saintly life further, he made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, pledging to remain in Jerusalem as a missionary. However, the mission society that was already there forbade his work, so he began a long trek back to Spain to study. On the way, Iñigo received a vision of the Messiah. This experience comforted him more than any of his previous attempts at obedience. For the rest of his life, he sought to see and hear Jesus during meditation as a source of reassurance.

Iñigo folded all these experiences into his *Spiritual Exercises*, a book that deeply influenced the Catholic Counter-Reformation. The exercises drew on disciplines of meditation, contemplation, prayer, and supervision. They functioned as a tool for conquering selfishness, examining conscience, realigning habits, and making decisions. Initially he offered the exercises to the serfs and the sick to whom he preached on the streets.

This informal preaching and spiritual direction roused Inquisition suspicions, and he was jailed by both of the first two universities that he attended. Eventually, he entered the University of Paris, where future Protestant Reformer John Calvin was also studying. Now known by his Latin name, Ignatius earned a master of arts in theology and practiced his spiritual disciplines with a small group

of close friends. These seven men took vows together to obey the Pope in whatever missionary endeavor he might command, and in 1540 they obtained his permission to establish the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits.

The following method of prayer derives from the *Spiritual Exercises*, “Week Two,” which summons us to meditate on gospel accounts of Jesus’ birth. Ignatius writes, “it is helpful to pass the five senses of the imagination through . . . contemplation, in the following way: The first point is to see the persons with the sight of the imagination, meditating and contemplating in particular the details about them. . . . The second, to hear with the hearing what they are, or might be, talking about. . . . The third [and fourth], to smell and to taste. . . . The [fifth], to touch with the touch, as for instance, . . . the places where such persons put their feet and sit, always seeing to my drawing profit from [this exercise].”¹

Like Iñigo, we may long to know Jesus intimately, but prefer action—even good works—or escape to medicate the inner chaos. We would rather do battle for Jesus, than risk being sucked under by uncomfortable emotions that might arise if we sit still with Jesus. Imagination prayer provides a structured foray into the heart (Ps 33:20–21). It engages our social awareness, minimizing emotion for emotion’s sake. Instead of losing ourselves in busyness or fantasy, we employ our imaginations to identify with a character from the gospels who knew Jesus and through that empathy discover our own conversations with the Lord (John 16:12–13).

On the other hand, we may find ourselves trapped in our heads or blocked by the hurt of previous human relationships. We gather information as a retreat into the mind’s storeroom of ideas. Perhaps we read or ask questions in order to avoid the space in our own hearts designed for people. Instead this Ignatian prayer uses our imaginations to skirt this dominance of the analytical mind. It cracks the parlor door for a gentle Savior, whom we can trust to handle us with care and to fill the emptiness with warmth (Matt 9:36; Rev 3:20). And as we maintain this engagement with him, we add depth and scope to how we share him with those around us.

Practice

1. Pick an action scene from the gospels as a foundation for your prayer. In other words, choose a story in which Jesus is doing something rather than teaching something. Some possible stories include:

- Jesus Heals Two Blind Men (Matt 9:27–31)
- Jesus Walks on Water (Matt 14:22–43)
- Jesus Heals Jairus’ Daughter and the Bleeding Woman (Mark 5:21–43)
- A Woman Anoints Jesus (Mark 14:3–9)
- Jesus’ Heals in Simon’s House (Luke 4:37–41)
- Jesus Goes to the Cross (Luke 23:26–30)
- Jesus Raises Lazarus (John 11:28–44)
- Thomas Believes Jesus Is Alive (John 20:24–29)

¹ “The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola” (trans. Elder Mullan; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Christian Classics Ethereal Library, 2005), 32. Cited 1 Aug 2006. Online: www.ccel.org/ccel/ignatius/exercises.html.

2. Read the passage several times. Perhaps once you'll read slowly as if for the first time. Another time through, maybe reading it aloud will help you get the feeling of the whole scene.
3. Invite the Lord to be present with you, to guide and protect as you seek to be with him.
4. Now quiet yourself before God. Some people use techniques like body awareness and breathing to still themselves.
5. Let your imagination work on the gospel scene. Imagine the location. In other words, are you by a lake or on a mountain? What time of day is it? See the people involved. Who is there with Jesus? City folk, farmers, shepherds, the disciples, women, Pharisees, crowds? How do your feet feel? What do you bump into, touch with your hands? What do you smell? What do you taste? What is being said by Jesus and others? What emotions might be in the hearts of various people? What actions are taken by Jesus and others?
6. Put yourself at the scene. Take the place of one of the characters and see the scene through the eyes of that person. What is he or she feeling? Thinking? Doing?
7. Release your imagination from your inner critic. Your imagined scene need not reproduce first-century Jerusalem with forensic accuracy. Let go of your prayer list. You and God can talk about details of your day later. (Suggestions for dealing with distractions can be found under *Lectio Divina/Practice/4*.) The point is neither to see "right," nor to cover everything, but to be with Jesus. Remember that you come to God as a child to his mother. Her presence is sufficient to comfort her child (Ps 131:2). The child does not require her to produce scientific evidence that there is no monster under the bed. In the same way, do not refuse to enjoy Jesus' presence until this form of prayer measures up to whatever criteria your mind may generate (Job 40:2-4; Rom 11:34). Remember that God has redeemed all of your faculties, including your imagination (Luke 5:23-24). More importantly, it is he whom we trust to communicate clearly using whatever method he chooses.
8. On the other hand, do not be consumed and overwhelmed by your emotions. With intention, choose to be "taken in" by your encounter with Jesus without becoming sucked under by the scene. Emotionalism is not the goal in itself. Being together with Jesus, experiencing his presence, is the goal (Luke 10:39).
9. Now "freeze frame." Stay with a particular picture involving yourself and Jesus. Talk to him and listen to what he says to you. Spend time in his presence. Allow your imagination to serve your faith. Jesus is not here the way you imagine him, but he most assuredly is with you, seeing you, listening to you, speaking to you.

10. Do you come away from the scene with Jesus frustrated, empty, worried, content, eager? Are these actually reflections of how you feel about your daily, *non*-imagined walk with Jesus or about a particular circumstance with which you want him to be involved? When you consider what happens after your scene, as recorded in Scripture, does that change how you think about your encounter? Ignatian prayer is meant to be experiential. Perhaps you simply spent uninterrupted time with him. The purpose is not necessarily to gain new spiritual insights—though these may come—but to deepen your relationship with Jesus.

11. Write down what you have heard, what happened, what you said, and/or what the theme seemed to be, or share this with your small group, prayer partner, or spiritual friend.

Sample the Prayer

When your time for meditation is limited, dwell on only one of the above sensory questions and apply it to only one of the characters in the scene. For example, in the story of Jesus walking on the water, think about whether and how sea-sick Peter felt in the boat because of the waves. How would you feel in that circumstance? Tomorrow, return to the story again and reflect on how the water felt under Peter's feet. Work your way through the story slowly, asking yourself how you relate (or do not) to that character's experience with Jesus.

Practice Together

If you would like to practice imagination prayer as a group, there are several approaches you may take. The first is a guided individual experience, which members share and process afterwards. In the second, members act out the story together, simultaneously role-playing—the imagined part—and processing how imagined experience and real-life communion with Jesus intersect.

For a guided exercise of imagination prayer, designate one person to select and read the passage aloud several times while other members practice steps 5–9 above as individuals. When everyone has found a comfortable posture and position in the room, the leader instructs the group to take several deep breaths in and out together. Ask the Lord to be present.

- Invite the group to listen to the passage, imagining the physical environment. Read the passage aloud the first time at a neutral rate, and wait one minute.
- Then invite the group to imagine the other people in the scene with Jesus. This time read the passage slowly, pausing after each phrase, and then wait in silence for two minutes.
- For the third reading, invite the group to place themselves in the scene and imagine what their bodies feel. Read the passage, emphasizing the action words, and wait in silence for four minutes.
- The fourth time, instruct the group to hear what the speakers in the passage are saying, and then read the passage emphasizing the spoken words. Wait in silence for six minutes.
- Finally, tell the group to imagine themselves as one of the characters in the passage. Tell them that when you are done reading, they can freeze frame, stay with a particular picture involving themselves and Jesus, talk to him, listen to what he says, and abide in his presence. Then read the passage in a neutral tone and pause in silence for eight minutes.

Ask the group to fasten in their minds anything that stands out from their conversations or about their experiences. When members have regrouped, invite them to share how they experienced the scene, what their interaction with Jesus was like, and how the imagined encounter might intersect with their current real-world situations. Allow others in the group to ask questions that might provoke thoughtful reflection, but avoid debating whose imagined version was right or accurate.

Whole group imagination prayer requires another level of commitment, since each one must practice both role-playing and self-awareness throughout the exercise. Instead of choosing an action scene with Jesus, find a parable that he told in the gospels, such as the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37). As a group, read the passage and identify key characters and their primary actions. After these details are decided, each member should sit quietly and individually consider which character she identifies with, why she identifies with that character, and how Jesus might call her to fulfill this role in the next few moments. Invite the Lord to reveal his real-life call to individuals through the role-playing to follow.

When everyone is ready, each person modeling a particular character should group themselves together. In the Good Samaritan, for example, all the hurt people should lay down in the middle of the room. All the caregiver innkeepers should wait for a hurt person to be brought to them and then faithfully minister to that person's real-life needs. All the sensitive Samaritans should tend to a hurt person, convey her to the caregiver, and return to check on her.

It is not important that there be equal numbers of each role-player, nor that much acting occur. Indeed, do not allow your concentration on what Jesus might be doing and saying through this exercise of imagination prayer to become distracted by trying to act the part "right" or well. What is important is that each person be present both to the action and to how Jesus is using the role-playing to speak to the real-life needs of group members. Is he inviting a "hurt person" to share a real need with a "Samaritan" or an "inn-keeper," for example? Or is he simply providing the hurt person a ministry to be received?

When all of the members are done, regroup and share how each one experienced the scene and what her interaction with Jesus was like.

Consider

1. Have you ever experienced a long, unavoidable season of pondering like Ignatius' illness or his long journeys? What did you think about? Did you find the lack of diversion beneficial? Tedious? How so?
2. Fully knowing someone involves sharing experience with that person, not just knowing about him or her. What are the advantages to relational knowledge that you cannot get with mere information? What do you risk in knowing Jesus this way? What do you fear Jesus discovering in you?
3. What church traditions in our day emphasize experience and emotions? How is imagination prayer similar to these traditions? Different?

4. Describe the benefits of being tied to a particular passage of Scripture. What are the limits of imagination prayer?

5. Think about praying this prayer in a group. How would it help or hinder for a designated reader to repeat the passage every few minutes? How could members of a group help one another unpack the encounter and relate it back to the *non-imagined* aspects of their lives?

Study Further

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