

# *Ignatian meditation: Using your imagination and Scripture*

*Excerpted from J. Veltri, Orientations for Spiritual Growth*

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The point of departure in Gospel Contemplation is the imagination. With this method, one primarily uses the active imagination upon a particular event in Jesus' life. The gospel story is the guided imagery context for the imagination. Gospel Contemplation differs from our present-day, psychological, guided imagery techniques in that the person at prayer actively keeps oneself more or less within the gospel framework. In Gospel Contemplation, one does not let the imagination roam as freely as one might do with guided imagery techniques.

Secondly, Gospel Contemplation differs from Contemplative Prayer Forms precisely because it involves images, feelings, and thoughts. Therefore, a rule of thumb is this: To the extent that images, feelings, and thoughts are absent, the prayer more closely approximates the Contemplative Prayer Forms explained above than it does Gospel Contemplation. Certainly as one makes use of Gospel Contemplation, as with many other methods, one is frequently led into moments of prolonged imageless, wordless, faith-filled experiences of God.

## **Importance Of Imagination**

Since the point of departure in Gospel Contemplation is the imagination, it is important to consider the difference between the words imaginary and imagination. When we use the word imaginary about anything, we generally mean that it is not real, not true, and that there is no objectivity in it. In our Western culture people tend to confuse these two words and so they consider the work and activity of imagination with suspicion. Nineteenth-century rationalism and our twentieth-century scientific method with its penchant for attempting to achieve objective knowledge contributed to a separation between the work of imagination and the work of reason. As a result, we often fail to appreciate that imagination is very "rational," though not necessarily analytical. Great inventions of human history and discoveries of science owe their initial inspiration to the work of imagination.

Without imagination, we would not be able to understand what another person is saying to us. For instance, if I asked you to list and describe for me the things that you did during the past two weeks and you began to tell me, the key way you would be able to access them from your memory bank would be through the function of your imagination. Furthermore, the only way I could truly appreciate and adequately take in your descriptions would be through the function of my imagination. Imagination, just as much as analytical thinking, is rational. Even though imagination primarily functions through narrative discourse with a logic different from analytical logic, it deals with the understanding and communication of meaning. Let me give this working description of the word imagination:

Imagination is that power within each of us which equips us *to make present what is not present*. Imagination is intimately connected with our senses which take in the data coming to us from our environment. Imagination is linked intimately also with our memory by helping the memory access data from within us. Enmeshed with our cognitive powers, imagination is essential to our grasp of meaning and to the communication of the same. With our power of memory, imagination can be a gateway to the unconscious and to deep feelings. The imagination is key to our ability to use and to create symbols that are so important to us as rational beings.

## How does this method proceed?

This is how you can enter into the life of Jesus through prayer:

1. Select a short concrete/action passage.

First, from one of the Gospels, select an action passage, preferably fast-moving and colourful in detail. When you first begin to use this method do not attempt to pray a parable or a sermon.

2. Relax and settle into God's presence.

Ask for a particular grace that you are seeking or the particular gift you need at this time - perhaps to know Jesus more intimately, or to become more compassionate, or to be healed in a particular area of your heart etc.

3. Read aloud the passage several times, pausing half a minute or so between each reading while the gospel episode takes hold of you.

Slowly read the passage once - aloud, if circumstances allow. Then for 30 seconds or so look up from the page and let the scene sink into your imagination. Do a second oral reading, noticing details which you missed in the first reading. Again look up from the page for 30 seconds or so, until these new details fit into the total scene in your imagination. In the third reading, you will see more details for the first time, also insights, questions and interpretations will begin to occur to you. Use a half-minute to let them settle into your memory. Then read a fourth or even a fifth time until almost all the distractions have disappeared, and the Gospel scene totally saturates your imagination.

4. Now place the bible aside and let the scene happen.

Do nothing to promote it except to stay alert to its developments. As you let yourself sink into the scene, you will tend to lose the sense of yourself and to identify with the situation. Suppose, for example, that you have read about Jesus quieting the storm on the lake. You may imagine the wind howling, the boat pitching, the apostles struggling at the oars. If this identification deepens, you will find yourself in the boat, e.g., at the oars, or you may find yourself to be in Peter or Philip. Sometimes you will discover yourself drifting in and out of the scene, in and out of various people of the scene.

5. Allow yourself to take part in the scene which is now present to you.

Be as passive as possible while being as alert as possible. In fact, let everyone else control the event: Jesus, Peter, Mary, Martha, John. You merely interact with the persons, listen and reply to their words, take part in their activity - conversing with them, accompanying them, helping them in their occupations, in whatever ways you find yourself as part of the event that is present to you.



**Pick Passage**  
**Prepare**  
**Place and People**  
**Pray**

6. Do not moralize or try to make applications.

Don't moralize (for example, "I should be more spontaneous like Peter when I am with my friends ...") or draw theological conclusions (for example, "Notice how the three temptations of Jesus parallel the temptations of the Israelites ...") or try to make clever applications ("It's amazing how the Pharisees are so much like the people I am working with ...") By losing yourself in the persons, words and activity of the gospel event your whole being is affected and influenced. You won't need applications because you will notice what happens to you either in the period of reflection after your prayer or, more subtly, in the effects in your life as almost by osmosis you begin to put on the mind and heart of Jesus's Spirit.

7. After your period of prayer comes to an end, make a review for a few minutes by reflecting upon what took place during the prayer.

What happened in you during this prayer exercise? What did you notice as standing out even slightly? Is there something you should return to in a later period of prayer? Give thanks to the Lord for being with you during this time.