

thee. Blessed art thou amongst women. And blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.") The large ones, the Our Father. There are also different events from the lives of Jesus and Mary to think about while you are praying each "decade," or set of ten.

The origins of the Rosary lie deep in the Middle Ages: lay men and women used the Rosary as a way of praying along with the nearby monastic communities, who themselves would move through the 150 psalms during the year. (Three times around the Rosary would mean 150 Hail Marys.) As Sally Cunneen writes in a book of essays called *Awake My Soul*, "When most Christians were illiterate and when books, including Bibles, were unavailable except in monasteries, a string of beads or seeds provided a simple means for the faithful to re-create their attachment to the events of the Gospel as they prayed the prayer that Jesus taught and, also, repeated the words of Gabriel and Elizabeth to Mary," that is, the Hail Mary.

After his experience as a spiritual director, David felt that this "simple means" of prayer that his mother enjoyed was, well, too simple. So he decided to teach his mother something about "real prayer," as he said.

"Why do you pray the Rosary?" he asked her.

"David, I've always prayed the Rosary," she said.

"But why?"

"Well, I enjoy it," she said.

Sensing that he was making little progress, David decided he would probe his mother's limited experience in prayer and teach her a "better" way to pray.

So he asked, "What happens when you pray the Rosary?"

"Well, I quiet myself down," she said. "And then I look at God, and God looks at me."

"That stopped me in my tracks!" David said with a laugh when he recounted that story. He saw that he had been wrong to prejudge his mother's spiritual experiences. Who knows what is going on inside

of another person? He recognized the danger of privileging one way of relating to God over another. As St. Ignatius wrote, "It is dangerous to make everyone go forward by the same road!"

David realized something else too. "For all of my training, she probably had a deeper relationship with God than I had!"

David used to tell that story to remind me that there is no right way to pray. But there may be a particular method of prayer that fits you more comfortably.

So let's talk about some ways of prayer that are most often considered part of the Ignatian tradition. At the end of the chapter I'll speak more broadly about other ways, but the following methods are those most closely associated with Ignatian spirituality.

As you read along, notice which ones you feel most drawn to. Perhaps God is calling you, through this attraction, to try one out. Perhaps in one of these practices, as David's mother would say, God could look at you, and you could look at God.

IGNATIAN CONTEMPLATION

Remember those five hypothetical Jesuits I mentioned in the first chapter? The ones who gave us four definitions of Ignatian spirituality? Well, if you asked those same five to describe the Ignatian tradition of prayer, chances are that they would first mention "Ignatian contemplation."

All prayer is contemplative. But here I'm using the term to describe a certain type of prayer, which also goes by the names "contemplation," "contemplative prayer," and "imaginative prayer." Though Ignatius didn't invent this kind of prayer, he popularized it by giving it center stage in his Spiritual Exercises, where he called it "composition of place."

In Ignatian contemplation you "compose the place" by imagining yourself in a scene from the Bible, or in God's presence, and then taking part in it. It's a way of allowing God to speak to you through your imagination.

This was one of Ignatius's favorite ways to help people enter into a relationship with God. And it flowed from his own experience in prayer. As David Fleming writes, while Ignatius was an excellent analytical thinker (even if he probably would not have thought of himself as an intellectual), the "mental quality of thought that drove his spiritual life was his remarkable imagination."

When I first heard about this method in the novitiate, I thought it sounded ridiculous. *Using your imagination? Making things up in your head? Was everything you imagined supposed to be God speaking to you? Isn't that what crazy people think?*

In one of my first conversations with David, I confessed my doubts, even disappointment, about "Ignatian contemplation." As he listened, he began to smile. I can still see him sitting in his easy chair with his cup of coffee at the ready. "Let me ask you a question," he said. "Do you think that God can speak to you through your relationships with other people?"

"Of course," I said.

"Through reading Scripture and through the sacraments?" Yes and yes.

"Through your daily experiences, and through your desires and emotions?" Yes, yes, and yes.

"Do you think God can communicate through what you see every day and hear and feel and even smell?" Of course.

"Then why couldn't God speak to you through your imagination?" That made sense. Think seriously about your imagination, David said. Wasn't it a gift from God, like your intellect or your memory? And if it was a gift, why couldn't it be used to experience God?

This made sense, too. Using my imagination wasn't so much making things up, as it was trusting that my imagination could help to lead me to the one who created it: God. That didn't mean that everything I imagined during prayer was coming from God. But it did mean that from time to time God could use my imagination as one way of communicating with me.

So, how do you "do" Ignatian contemplation? Well, here's where we turn directly to the Spiritual Exercises for some help.

The Composition, by Imagining the Place

First, take a passage from Scripture that you enjoy. For those making their way through the Spiritual Exercises, it's the passage that is assigned for the day. For example, in the Second Week of the Exercises, you follow Jesus through his ministry: preaching, traveling, healing the sick, forgiving sinners, welcoming the outcasts, and so on.

One of my favorite stories from the Second Week is the storm at sea, which is contained in several Gospels. It's often helpful for people who are struggling with big problems in their lives—i.e., everyone.

In the version of the story in Luke's Gospel (8:22–25), the disciples are in a boat with Jesus, when a sudden squall comes up. (On the Sea of Galilee, this happens even today.) "The boat was filling with water, and they were in danger," writes Luke. Terror stricken, they ask Jesus, who is asleep, why he doesn't help them. "Master, Master, we are perishing!" they shout. Jesus awakes and "rebukes" the wind and the rain, stilling the storm with his word. Then he turns to them and asks, "Where is your faith?"

The disciples are stunned. "Who then is this," they say, "that he commands even the winds and the water, and they obey him?"

Ignatius invites you to enter into the scene by "composing the place" by imagining yourself in the story with as much detail as you can muster.

Your starting points are the five senses.

The first step, after asking for God's help in the prayer, is to ask yourself: *What do you see?* Assuming that you're imagining yourself on the boat (instead of imagining the scene from a distance, which is another option), you might picture yourself with some of the disciples around you, all of you huddled together on the little wooden boat.

There's plenty to imagine when it comes to your "imaginative sight." What might the boat look like? You might have seen photos of the "Jesus Boat," a fishing vessel from the time of Jesus that was recovered from the Sea of Galilee in 1986. It is a long wooden boat with slats set up for uncomfortable-looking seats. As you picture this, you might realize that it's crowded for the disciples on board, something you have never thought about before. By the way, you don't have to be an expert in ancient cultures, or an archaeologist, to do this kind of prayer. It doesn't matter if you don't know exactly what Palestinian boats looked like in the first century. "Your" boat could be a modern version.

What does the scene *outside* the boat look like? Part of the fear of sailing in the dark is not knowing what will happen next, whether a lightning strike will hit the mast, a wave will crash over the side, or an unexpected swell will capsize the craft. And at night it's hard to see the waves except when they are lit up by flashes of lightning. With only one of your imaginative senses—sight—you can begin to experience some of the fear that the disciples must have felt.

Then imagine seeing Jesus asleep in the boat. Even something as simple as noticing him sleeping might make you ask new questions about Jesus. For instance, you might realize that his being asleep shows not so much lack of care for his friends, or even ignorance of the possible danger, but simple fatigue after a long day. Jesus led an active life, you may realize, with people always clamoring for his attention and care. How could he not have been tired?

Your understanding of the fear of the disciples is now coupled with compassion for the humanity of Jesus, who, after all, had a physical body that tired.

It's one thing to read a Gospel story and simply hear the words "Jesus was asleep." It's quite another to imagine it, to see it in your mind's eye. You may gain new insight into the humanity of Jesus in a way not possible from reading it in a book, or hearing it in a homily, because it's *your* insight.

Next ask yourself: *What do you bear?* You might imagine not only the howling wind and the booming thunder, but also the sound of huge waves crashing over the side of the boat. Maybe you imagine the sloshing of water over the floorboards, and the fishing gear and nets clattering noisily on the deck as the boat lurches from side to side. Perhaps you hear the disciples' protests. Are they growing resentful of Jesus' indifference? Over the sound of the wind and the waves you hear some grumbling. Do their complaints grow louder as the storm intensifies? Do they shout over the thunder? Our own protests to God do the same in the face of violent storms in our lives.

From the Spiritual Exercises

Here is St. Ignatius using "composition of place," by imagining the Nativity scene. Notice the questions that he asks, and notice that he doesn't tell you exactly what to imagine but leaves it up to your imagination, where Ignatius trusted that God would be at work on a very personal level.

The composition, by imagining the place. Here it will be to see in imagination the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Consider its length and breadth, whether it is level or winds through valleys and hills. Similarly, look at the place or cave of the Nativity. How big is it, or small? How low or high? And how is it furnished?

With your imaginative sight and hearing, you have now begun to enter more fully into this scene. But you're not finished yet: you have a few more senses at your disposal.

What do you smell? Along with seawater washing into the fishing boat, you would smell . . . fish! (Or at least the residual smell

from the day's catch.) Finally, in such close quarters with the disciples you would smell rancid body odor and perhaps even some bad breath.

None of these imaginative exercises asks you to picture anything weird or bizarre. All Ignatius suggests is trying to imagine—as best you can—what things *might have* been like. You also trust that, since you're trying to enter into this scene to meet God, God will help you with this prayer.

You still have two more senses left. Touch is one. *What do you feel? Are you wearing homespun clothes? Maybe the material feels scratchy against your skin. If you're sitting in a boat during a storm, you're probably soaked, feeling cold, wet, and miserable, on top of being tired from traipsing around Galilee with Jesus all day.*

Finally, *what do you taste?* For this particular meditation, this sense is slightly less important. But for others, like stories where Jesus and his disciples are eating and drinking—as during the wedding feast at Cana and the Last Supper—this is a key sense. But even here in the boat, you might imagine tasting the saltwater spray.

Now that you have used your senses and “composed the place,” you have the scene set. At this point you can just let the scene play out in your mind, with you in the picture.

But it's not just something to “watch.” “You do not merely imagine the event as though you were watching it on film,” Joseph A. Tetlow, S.J., writes in *Making Choices in Christ*. “You enter into the scene, letting it unfold as though you were part of it, standing warm in the temple or ankle-deep in the water of the Jordan.”

Let the story play out in your imagination with as little judging on your part as possible. Let yourself be drawn to whatever seems most attractive or interesting. For example, if you notice the disciples more than Jesus, try not to judge that as inappropriate or wrong. While you're in the meditation, allow God to lead you through your imagination.

Pay Attention!

Afterward take note of what happened within yourself while you were involved in the story. As with any kind of prayer, there are many things that could be revealed: insights, emotions, desires, memories, feelings, as we discussed in the last chapter.

God desires to communicate with you all the time, but when you *intentionally* open yourself up to God's voice, you can often hear it more clearly. To use the metaphor of friendship, it is similar to saying to a friend, “You have my undivided attention.” Ignatian contemplation enables us to hear more easily, or differently, and to recognize something that might otherwise be overlooked.

Opening Ourselves

Though intended by Ignatius to help one enter into events from the life of Christ, Ignatian contemplation can be used by all religious traditions to help you appreciate what John J. English, S.J., describes in his book *Spiritual Freedom* as “sacred events.”

In Ignatian contemplation we form the habit of losing ourselves . . . in sacred events of great significance. After some initial practice, we learn how to stay with the scene and its actions, to relax in the presence of those who speak and move, and to open ourselves without reserve to what occurs, so that we may receive a deep impression of the event's mysterious meaning.

Insights, for example, are common in Ignatian contemplation. Whenever an insight would come up in my prayer, something that was clearly new, something that was clearly a fruit of the prayer, David would say, “Pay attention!”

For instance, let's say you notice how terrified the disciples are—not only by the storm, but by something more surprising: Jesus' display of power. His miracles could have been frightening to this band of Galileans. Though you may have heard this story dozens of times, perhaps you realize in a new way that watching the sea stilled by your friend would have been astonishing, amazing, exciting—and frightening.

You've just received an insight into the life of the disciples: it may have been frightening being around Jesus. Maybe you've heard about "fear of God." It is a natural enough reaction. "Who then is this, that he commands even the wind and the water, and they obey him?" they say afterward. For the first time, you feel not only the excitement behind that statement but also the fear. Then you wonder if they ever talked about their reaction with Jesus. What would Jesus have said in reply?

That might be as far as that insight goes—which is terrific. If you get a deeper insight into Scripture, it will help deepen your faith. But often the insight might lead to an insight about *your own life*. It might prompt you to ask yourself, *Where am I afraid of God?* Are there places where you've seen signs of God's presence but have been afraid to admit this—because you're afraid of God's power? Sometimes it's frightening thinking about God's taking an interest in your life. Is fear preventing you from a deeper relationship with God?

Just as common in contemplative prayer is a more emotional reaction, which can be surprising, revealing, and clarifying. The easiest way to explain this is to take something that happened to me when praying about this passage just a few months ago.

Swamped!

Recently I traveled to California to make the Spiritual Exercises, the first time since the novitiate over twenty years ago. It was part of the very last stage of my formal training as a Jesuit. (Yes, you read that

correctly: the complete training of a Jesuit priest, which continues after ordination, may sometimes take over twenty years.)

In any event, during the Second Week that precise passage came up. To be honest, I thought, *The storm at sea? Been there, prayed that.* I couldn't imagine any surprises in store. But the God of Surprises had other ideas.

As I prayed about the storm at sea, there were no insights, few desires, little emotion, scant memories, and hardly any feelings. But I knew not to be frustrated. Prayer is often dry, and, at least on the surface, little seems to be going on.

The next day, I returned to the scene in my imagination. As soon as I climbed into the boat, a word popped into my head: *swamped*. The boat was taking on water during the violent storm, being swamped, and the disciples were terrified.

Swamped was the word I used frequently with friends to describe my daily life. I was forever racing among a variety of projects and often felt overwhelmed. Consequently, I had started to wonder if it was time for a change—time to either ask for a new job or change the way I was working.

You've probably felt this way at some point in your life. Many of us—parents of small children, overworked business executives, harried teachers, busy students, stressed-out priests—feel swamped by life, pulled in a million different directions. You think: *I have to change the way I work or change how I am living.*

The next day my spiritual director encouraged me to return to the scene. Repetition is an important part of the Ignatian tradition of prayer. Ignatius thought it important to gain all the fruit you could from a particular prayer. "I should notice and dwell on those points where I felt greater consolation or desolation," he wrote in the Exercises.

When I returned, I imagined myself standing on the sunny shore of the Sea of Galilee, after the storm passed. Then I imagined telling Jesus how swamped I felt. Sitting on the beach and airing out my feelings felt freeing. What a relief to share this with Jesus.

Then, in my imagination, the boat that Jesus had saved slowly started to sink into the Sea of Galilee. I was relieved to watch it slip away—as if all of my worries were sinking with it. Maybe I was being invited to let that old life slip away.

Sometimes, as you might realize already, these contemplative prayers move beyond the outlines of the Gospel stories and bring you to unexpected places. Obviously there's nothing in the Gospels about the boat sinking! But that's not to say God can't work through this kind of imaginative prayer as well.

Then I imagined the two of us building a new boat, with brand-new, fresh-smelling wood. At the same time, I thought, I could also hoist the old boat out of the water and fix it. Maybe the old boat just needed a little mending; a little tar, a few new boards. Maybe my old life just needed a little mending, too.

In prayer, I asked Jesus how he was able to juggle everything, how he was able to handle all the demands on his time. An answer suggested itself; Jesus took things as they came and trusted that God was bringing things before him, rather than trying to plan everything. He also accepted the need to withdraw from the crowds sometimes.

By the close of the prayer, I realized that whatever boat I chose—the new one (asking for a new job) or the restored old one (changing the way I worked)—Jesus would be in the boat with me. I had nothing to fear. That insight gave me enormous peace. No longer did I feel swamped, because I realized that I had a choice in life. (In the end I chose to fix up the old boat.)

Not every contemplative prayer is so rich. Not every one brings insights or emotions. You might try several times before it feels like you're even *in* the scene. Over the past twenty years, I've logged many hours, struggling in vain to “compose the scene” to little apparent effect. That's not to say that nothing was happening, because spending time with God is always transformative. But not every prayer leads to noticeable fruit.

But sometimes it is rich. And I offer that personal experience not because it's important that I felt swamped, but to illustrate that

from even the most familiar of Scripture passages, God can reveal unfamiliar things, if you are open to hearing them.

LECTIO DIVINA AND THE SECOND METHOD

The second form of Ignatian prayer is similar to Ignatian contemplation. It goes by the name *lectio divina* or meditation. (As with “Ignatian contemplation,” the same prayer often goes by many names, which causes no end of confusion.)

Lectio divina means “sacred reading.” Like contemplation, it uses Scripture to draw you into a deeper relationship with God. *Lectio* relies on both the imagination and the intellect. It also differs slightly from Ignatian contemplation. But most types of prayer overlap, so there's no problem if you combine aspects of one with another.

When I first stumbled across the term *lectio divina*, I imagined elderly monks sequestered in noiseless rooms, silently turning the parchment pages of medieval manuscripts, as sunlight streamed through a stained-glass window, illuminating the words they were reading. While appealingly romantic, it seemed something that would remain far from my experience.

But after I entered the novitiate, David introduced me to this ancient practice in an accessible way. Monks and cloistered nuns still do *lectio divina*, but it is a practice available to even the busiest and most nonmonastic among us. Essentially *lectio divina* is the practice of encountering God through Scripture.

Like Ignatian contemplation, while this form of prayer was not invented by Ignatius, it is very popular among Jesuits. Ignatius calls it the “Second Method” of prayer in the Exercises. (In case you think we've overlooked the “First Method” in the Exercises, we haven't: The First Method is less a method of prayer than a preparation: you review the Ten Commandments, and so on, to see where you have sinned, and you then make amends to your life.)