

the
**Ignatian
workout**

daily spiritual exercises
for a healthy faith

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centeredness, for meaning. In this way, the prayer becomes a way to cleanse our hearts of anything that is not of God or, better, a way to ask that God cleanse our hearts so that we may know God and God's will more clearly and thus be liberated by it.

USING YOUR IMAGINATION

Perhaps the most basic and practical of Ignatius's ideas about prayer is his suggestion that we use our imagination. One example of this practice is what he calls "composition of place," indicating that it is about using our minds to put together a picture of what our prayer is about. There are two possibilities. The first is the more obvious: we read a scriptural story and imagine that we are part of that story, applying our senses to give us a very realistic idea of what the story is about. The second possibility takes a little creativity; it involves coming up with some image of an abstract idea like thankfulness or sin or dependence. In both cases, though, the idea is to make prayer time an exercise in imagination so that during and after the prayer, we can pay attention to the ways we imagine God in our lives.

The imagination is a powerful tool. Sports psychologists have begun to use the power of imagination to enhance athletic performance by encouraging athletes to visualize themselves in the midst of their activity. When I was a coach, I always spent time with my athletes, practicing this exercise. I spent perhaps twenty minutes having them imagine their race the following day, a race that usually lasted only about six or seven minutes. They imagined the start of the race, carefully breaking down each initial stroke, so key to establishing a rhythm early on. They focused on their breathing, their hands on the oar, their posture, their leg drive. I wanted them to break down every element of their stroke, to focus their attention on what it feels like to row well, even though it all happens at once in a matter of seconds. I asked them to feel themselves relaxed and rowing well, to imagine a boat in perfect synchronicity being lifted off the water and speeding smoothly through the course.

Sometimes what emerged during these exercises was someone's concern about a particular part of the race, perhaps one that had been troublesome over the course of training the week before. In other words, the imagination exercise, when reflected upon later, highlighted something that the athlete needed to be particularly conscious of during the race. Usually, I found, this heightened consciousness enabled the athlete to execute well whatever concerned him or her. It helped the person to understand what part of the race needed specific attention.

This is a helpful metaphor for what using imagination in prayer helps us to do. By bringing imagination to bear on a particular aspect of our spiritual lives, we come to better understand what struggles we face, what issues we have yet to resolve, what ways God is calling us to grow. It is a very straightforward way of paying attention to our deeper selves, which often get overlooked in our busy lives. For while our spirituality is always underneath the layers of consciousness we use in everyday life, it often remains hidden. We tend to act out the symptoms of our spiritual selves, and if this aspect of ourselves is hurt, we can tend to behave in ways that do not further our ultimate good. The exercise of imagination in prayer makes us pay attention to our spiritual core and to the ways we manifest the character of this core in our choices.

There was a time when I learned something important about myself by using this kind of prayer. I was meditating on the story of Jesus feeding the five thousand—the story in which Jesus takes a few loaves and fishes and is able to feed the hordes that had gathered to listen to him. This was a story I had heard many times; I did not expect anything different to happen in my prayer. But I went ahead anyway, reading the story very closely and expecting to feel the usual sort of interest: it was nice that Jesus could do that for those people, etc. But as I read closely, a phrase caught my attention in a way I don't think I had ever even heard it before. It jumped out at me so that I could barely believe that I had missed it before. After the disciples ask Jesus to send the massive crowd home so they can buy food before too late, Jesus says, "You give them something to eat" (Mk 6:37).

Imagining the scene, I saw Jesus looking straight at me, emphasizing the “*You give them,*” suggesting to me something of Jesus’ expectation that I be the one to do something. In my prayer, I was a little uneasy, even perhaps a bit indignant: “You’re Jesus (for God’s sake!); you do it!” But I was on the spot. In fact, the rest of the story started to fade into the background of my imagination. In the story, Jesus eventually asks the disciples to gather the available food (five loaves and two fish), after which he prays to God, then distributes it to all five thousand. I was stuck on the image of Jesus looking to me to feed these people.

What this exercise taught me about was how I envisioned myself in relation to God: God was supposed to take care of everything while I sat and watched. After this prayer, though, I began to question the legitimacy of this image. It was clear that my imagination was getting stuck on a problem: the fact that Jesus wanted me to do the feeding told me that I needed to be more aware of the ways that I minister to other people, rather than just assuming God would put everything in order. As I think back on this exercise now, I am aware of how it has made an effect on the way I think about the world. I don’t understand God’s ways in the world, but I am convinced that I and others are called to do God’s loving work wherever we can. It seems to me that many problems we face as a society are due to our failures to love as Jesus did; and if we continually blame God for the messes we find ourselves in, we may ignore our own responsibilities for solving them (and for creating them in the first place). I still get mad at God and question the ways God made things, but now I know that I cannot ignore my responsibility to do the work of loving when I can.

As noted earlier, imagining oneself in a story is simple: What do you see? Smell? Hear? Feel? Taste? The more specific the senses, the more vivid the imagination. It can be helpful to dwell on each of these senses for some time, drawing out the time frame of the images the way I asked my athletes to do. There may be insights anywhere along the way, so it is good not to rush through. In fact, it may be helpful to imagine the same scene several times, to return to fruitful images. In chapters 4 through 6, I will offer some stories that are good for this imagination exercise. If you find that one of the stories is particularly

helpful, return to it at different points in the same day, week, month, or year—it can be good to revisit stories that challenge us to spiritual growth, even if only to understand later how we have changed.

The first method of using imagination in a scriptural story is something anyone can do—especially children, who love to use their imagination. The second method, though, can be more difficult; for instead of presenting us with the scene into which we insert our imagined selves, it demands that we come up with the appropriate image. Our selection of the image, though, can itself tell us a great deal about our spiritual selves, for the image will have to come from something in our experience. To use an important but difficult example, what image comes to mind when you conceive of sin? Do you imagine some historical event, like the Holocaust, or an injustice you saw performed by someone else, or some injury done to you, or something you have done? What does this image selection tell you about how you think about sin?

A literary example may illustrate how this application of imagination can be helpful. In Dante’s fourteenth-century epic *The Divine Comedy*, he begins with an observation about his own spiritual life:

*In the middle of the journey of our life
I found myself astray in a dark wood
Where the straight road had been lost sight of.¹*

The entire epic is Dante’s creative reflection on the state of his soul, which he imagines here as being lost in a dark forest. For Dante, this image of losing one’s way is a metaphor for this moment in the spiritual life. As one progresses through his story, it is easy to be struck by how detailed is his imagination of hell, purgatory, and heaven. Dante is able to convey his understanding of the spiritual life through different images and events of this journey.

Most of us will never have the chance to create such an extended vision of our spiritual lives, but we can follow Dante’s lead and use our imagination to understand them. If you conceive of your life as a journey, where are you now? Are you in the fast lane? Broken down

on the side of the highway? On cruise control? At a rest stop? Stuck behind a slow-moving vehicle? Are you preparing for the next stage of the journey by packing your bags? Have you just had a major accident? These are all images that we today can use to consider where we are in our lives, and there are many others. What kind of journey are you on? Where are you going? What kind of transportation are you using—car, plane, bicycle, feet? Who are your companions? How long do you think they will be with you? What kind of map are you using, if any? How has the journey been so far? Are you lost? Whom have you asked for directions?

These questions are suggestions for imagination. It is useful to consider your own questions, too, by paying attention to the things that happen as you imagine what your life looks like. In prayer, imagination can help us pay attention to things that we have not, perhaps, previously considered. It can tune us in to details and make us reconsider the ways we have become accustomed to thinking about things. In my example above, Jesus' words to me became the central focus of my prayer. Those words were always in the text, but I had not paid attention to them until I used my imagination.

In my classes, I usually do a short exercise with my students that helps them to recognize something about the way we think about the world. After talking for a few minutes, I tell them to close their eyes and think about what the classroom looks like. Then I begin to ask very specific questions about things that were in their field of vision but that many have not really paid attention to: What color is the floor? What is on the sign above the blackboard? What color shirt am I wearing? By asking these specific questions, I am asking them to pay attention to the ways that they use their vision. With every question, I find that only a handful of students can correctly identify the answers, meaning that although these items were in their field of vision, many students did not really pay attention to them.

It seems to me that this exercise is a metaphor for the way we operate in life. At any given moment, there are countless things we can look at in our field of vision—or to put it another way, in our field of vision, there are too many things to really pay attention to. We exercise a selective

attention, meaning that we tend to focus on what we think is most important—the person in the room, rather than the color of the furniture; the car in front of us, rather than the spelling on the road signs; the words on the page, rather than the table the book is resting on. Our minds work in such a way that certain things need to be in the foreground, others in the background. And what is true for our vision is also true of our thinking. We tend to focus on what we think is most important. So when we use imagination in thinking about biblical stories, we give ourselves the chance to change our focus. Imagination gives us control over the stories: we can freeze the action, rewind, fast-forward, skip, or whatever, so we can pay attention to both the foreground and the background. What is key is that sometimes the background is more important. It comprises all those elements that we do not perceive to be as important but that perhaps we should consider. I will use one of the gospel stories to illustrate this point.

The story of Zacchaeus is about a man who climbs a tree to get a good look at Jesus (Lk 19:1–10). Zacchaeus is small, and there is a great crowd around Jesus; so Zacchaeus decides that this is the only way he will ever get a chance to see this person everyone's talking about. In the story, Jesus spots Zacchaeus in the tree and says to him that he will stay with him; others criticize Jesus for staying with someone who is regarded as a sinner because he collects taxes.

It's an interesting story, but there is not much detail. When I imagine this story, I try to picture what it would be like as the different characters: Jesus, Zacchaeus, a member of the crowd. With these different perspectives, I can get a better sense of what might have actually happened. Luke gives us only a sketch in order to put into the foreground Jesus' decision to stay with a sinner, to "save what was lost" (Lk 19:10 NAB). This is an important theme, no doubt, but I don't think it's the only one. What's in the background? What strikes me is Jesus' decision—he ignores the people who have gathered around him. I think about how it's likely that there were some men who left work to meet him and probably traveled to get there. There might have been some women trying to keep their children in line as they walked from their homes to meet this public figure.

These were people who were interested in hearing Jesus—why did he ignore them? If I were a member of the crowd, I would probably feel a little resentful. If Zacchaeus had to climb a tree, maybe it's because he got there late or because he just happened to show up and was curious. Why did Jesus talk to him rather than to the people who took the time to get there earlier? On the other hand, though, I think about Zacchaeus himself, perhaps legitimately wanting to meet the holy man he's heard about but feeling left out because he's short. Maybe climbing a tree was the only way he could really see Jesus because the people closer to him were being selfish. Maybe Jesus himself could recognize that the crowd was a group of publicity hounds, and like some in the media today, they were there only because there was a story. Maybe Jesus called Zacchaeus because Jesus himself was paying attention to the background and not just to the people in the foreground.

Applying imagination to this story enables me to consider many different scenarios and to focus on different elements. When I do this, I am able to think about it in a richer way and to draw from it interesting conclusions about how I look at Jesus and his followers. I am able to bring the background into the foreground and pay greater attention to it, to see what I can learn from it. And I can ask God to help me understand what God wants.

MAKING YOUR REQUESTS KNOWN

Imagination can help us to set the stage for prayer, and it can itself be a prayerful exercise. But imagination can be tricky since it doesn't have to obey any laws. I often find my imagination flying off track; one minute Zacchaeus is in the tree, and the next he has sprouted wings and flown above the crowd, dropping water balloons on people. So an important complement to the practice of imaginative prayer is asking God for what we want out of it—making our requests known to God (who already knows) and to ourselves (who don't always really know). This means that we are dwelling on a particular aspect of the

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