

Ignatian Contemplation: Imaginative Prayer

Luke 1:39-45 Mary Visits Elizabeth

During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.

When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, she cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does this happen to me, that the mother of my Lord* should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

If you can, imagine this scene, setting aside any paintings or illustrations you have seen, *allowing your imagination to notice the details of this place*. Imagine this road to Judah. Consider its length and breadth, whether it is level or curvy, rocky or smooth, etc. Does it go through a valley or through hills? Notice any vegetation?

What is the weather like? Consider the sky, the temperature, the time of day, the wind or stillness of the air, etc... Where might you be in the scene? Are you alone? With others? Are you one of the "main" characters? If not, can you notice your role? What are you witnessing?

What are you experiencing here? What feelings might you notice?

What can you hear? What type of voices might you hear? Male? Female? Children? Animal sounds? Is it quiet?

Can you imagine a smell(s)? Does it remind you of anything or is it a foreign smell? Food smells? Vegetation smells? Pleasant? Unpleasant?

What is Mary like here? Elizabeth? Jesus? John? Can you sense Jesus in this space? If so, what might this experience be like for you?

After spending time with this scene, you might want to journal/write in your notebook the essence of this time of contemplation. Perhaps end your prayer talking with God about your experience.

St. Ignatius Loyola was convinced that God can speak to us as surely through our imagination as through our thoughts and memories. In the Ignatian tradition, praying with the imagination is called contemplation. In the Spiritual Exercises, contemplation is a very active way of praying that engages the mind and heart and stirs up thoughts and emotions. (Note that in other spiritual traditions, contemplation has quite a different meaning: it refers to a way of praying that frees the mind of all thoughts and images.)

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Ignatian contemplation is suited especially for the Gospels where we are invited to accompany Jesus through his life by imagining scenes from the Gospel stories. Let the events of Jesus' life be present to you right now. Visualize the event as if you were making a movie. Pay attention to the details: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings of the event. Lose yourself in the story; don't worry if your imagination is running too wild. At some point, place yourself in the scene.

Contemplating a Gospel scene is not simply remembering it or going back in time. Through the act of contemplation, the Holy Spirit makes present a mystery of Jesus' life in a way that is meaningful for you now. Use your imagination to dig deeper into the story so that God may communicate with you in a personal, evocative way.

We might initially worry about going beyond the text of the Gospel. If you have offered your time of prayer to God, then begin by trusting that God is communicating with you. If you wonder if your imagination is going "too far," then do some discernment with how you are praying. Where did your imagining lead you: Closer to God or farther away? Is your imagining bringing you consolation or desolation?

Some people find imaginative prayer difficult. They may not be able to picture the scene easily, yet they may have some intuition or gut reaction to the story. Or they may hear or feel the story more than visualize it. In a spirit of generosity, pray as you are able; don't try to force it. Rest assured that God will speak to you, whether through your memory, understanding, intellect, emotions, or imagination. ~Fr. Kevin O'Brien, *The Ignatian Adventure*

Praying Lectio Divina

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*Begin by slowly reading the scripture passage out loud. As you listen, try to set aside what you may know about this scripture and not try to analyze it.

- ◉ Notice any word or phrase that might seem to move your heart or stir something inside you.
- ◉ After a few moments of silence, write down the word or phrase that stirred you or caught your attention.

*Read through the same passage. This time, try to focus on how that word, phrase or idea speaks to you about what is occurring in your life today.

- ◉ You might ask, What does it mean for me today?
- ◉ How might Jesus be speaking to me about my life through this word, etc?
- ◉ Notice if any memories, images, songs, or other Scriptures come to mind.

*Let your pondering about the word or phrase lead you into a loving and holy conversation with God that connects what is going on in your life to what you have experienced in the Scripture reading.

*Lastly, shift your attention completely on God, simply loving and listening, resting in God's presence.

