



Gospel Contemplation

A Fuller Explanation of the Ignatian Tradition

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This explanation may help you to appreciate better the method that is suggested for most of the prayer exercises in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. The method is called by various names such as Gospel Contemplation, Method of Contemplation, Ignatian Contemplation. It makes use of guided imagery and active imagination within the framework of a gospel story from Jesus' life.

It happened one morning in an 8th century Italian monastery. On waking, the monks all dressed in their cells and then filed down the corridors to a central meeting room. There they sat quietly until a monk, standing at a lectern, began to read a passage from the Gospel of John. He read clearly in a leisurely manner verses 13-22 of chapter 2. He paused for 30 or 40 seconds. Then he reread the same passage in the same clear, leisurely manner. Again, he paused for half a minute, then read the same passage a third time.

When he paused this time, some of the monks began to return to their cells in order to pray over the passage. Others waited for the fourth reading and even the fifth before they, too, left for their cells.

What was happening? These repetitive readings saturated their imaginations with a gospel scene of particular energy and color. This saturation would, of course, minimize distractions, and encourage a frame of mind and heart conducive to prayer. Perhaps it would enable a monk to identify with some particular person in the gospel episode, and even to discover the inner feelings of Christ. The mystery of the gospel event would so take hold of the person at prayer that the past would become present through the instrument of the imagination and memory. The memory of the person at prayer would be influenced by the memory of Jesus present now to the person praying.

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

† 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.

† 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.

† Read aloud

Read 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.

† 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.

† 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.

† 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.

† 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.