

# Christian Prayer 5

## *'Ignatian' Prayer*

*What is 'Ignatian' Prayer? And why the inverted commas?*

Let's take those questions slowly and answer them in parts.

*Ignatian, as in coming from St Ignatius of Loyola?*

Ignatius was born in Spain and lived from 1491-1556. He was a member of the lower nobility and his passion was to be a soldier hero. He experienced a profound spiritual conversion after being wounded in war, and this conversion had the effect of bringing his previously 'commonplace' Christian faith to the very centre of his life, and he now wished to live above all as a disciple of Jesus.

He founded the religious order known as the Jesuits. An important part of their mission was and remains offering spiritual direction so other people also are helped to more fully and freely choose to live their lives as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ.

To assist this work Ignatius wrote his *Spiritual Exercises*, a book that describes a process of sustained prayerful reflection to help people to a deeper knowledge and love of God and a more deliberate decision to serve him in and through their daily lives - in their public life, with their families and so on.

*Why the inverted commas in 'Ignatian' Prayer?*

In the *Spiritual Exercises* Ignatius describes many ways of praying. Singling out just one as 'Ignatian' obscures the importance of the variety that he promotes. In addition the method of imaginative prayer that is commonly referred to as 'Ignatian Prayer' was in fact first popularised by St Francis of Assisi and was influential in spiritual movements well before Ignatius. So credit where credit is due.

*So, what is Imaginative Prayer?*

Imaginative prayer is a method that brings our imaginations to bear on, especially, the scriptures so that through them we more fully see, hear, touch, taste and otherwise engage with the historical events recorded there. Sometimes we look for the meaning of scripture, without properly being engaged by its reality. Imaginative prayer is a way of slowing us down and drawing us into a deeper, more personal engagement in the saving mysteries of Jesus' life and ministry.

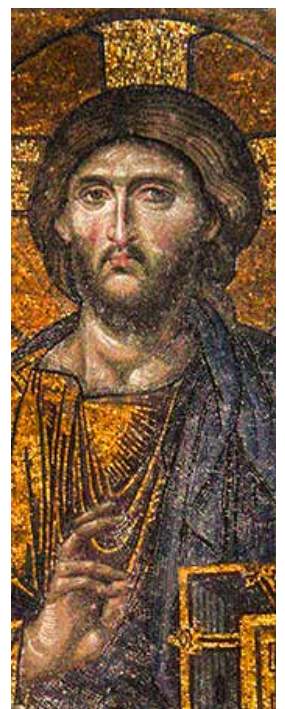
St Francis got there first! Remember his request, while visiting the small town of Greccio at Christmas time, that they gather animals and a crib so that when they celebrated the Christmas Mass they could better imagine the reality of the Nativity? It caught on, and we have had Christmas cribs in church and in our homes ever since.

Imaginative prayer has all this happen *within* us, by our using our imaginations. But we do it for the same reason, that we might better know the wondrous reality of God in flesh and those saving mysteries of Jesus' life and ministry.

*Strictly speaking 'Prayer' might be better in inverted commas too!*

The use of our memory and senses to imagine these scenes can - for some people - be so engaging and distracting that they forget to pray! Properly speaking the prayer comes after the act of imagination when one speaks with Jesus, for example, about what moved you during imaginative reconstruction. If we were praying with the story of the multiplication of loaves and fishes, we might have very vivid images of the bread and fish, even of their smell.

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But maybe the telling response was that, like the disciples – indeed maybe we found ourselves to be one of the disciples as we imagine the scene – we found ourselves asking Jesus to tell the crowd to clear off and fend for themselves.

It is suggested that the prayer proper is not the imagining of the scene itself as such, but rather our noticing what is our reaction to what we imagine, and this we bring to Jesus in prayer, to talk things through. However things are rarely so clear cut. Often the work of imagining and the work of noticing and considering our response are all mixed up together in what can be a playful and also very profound and moving prayer time.

### *Guided Imaginative Prayer*

When using this method of prayer as Ignatius recommended it, each person prays it for themselves. They construct the imagined scene, and allow the action to play out in their minds - rather like designing a film set and rehearsing with the actors.

However another common and fruitful way of using this method is for someone else to do that work and then present it to us as, what is generally called, a guided meditation. Three examples are provided on accompanying sheets.

It is by way of guided meditations that this imaginative prayer method is most likely to be used in classrooms, if only because of pressure of time. However allowing people to have the time and space to do it themselves from scratch can be a very positive contribution to school retreat days.

### *It doesn't always have to be imagination and scripture*

There are many guided meditations that do not directly engage with scripture, and that are none the worse for it. Indeed for students that are not familiar with scripture or are feeling distant from Jesus or church it may be preferable sometimes to use non-scriptural meditations, which they may find more accessible and helpful.

Again, several are provided on accompanying sheets. They have also been recorded and are available as Powerpoint presentations.

### *Writing your own meditations*

This is not difficult to do and it is well worth experimenting with. When writing meditations based on scripture, it is important to be faithful to the scripture passage and its original meaning(s).

Filling in gaps, exaggerating somewhat for effect – these are all techniques of that have been used for millennia, by Jews and Christians alike, to help people to a fresh experience and understanding of the scriptures. But variations that distort and diminish the original should be avoided.

If you have an idea inspired by scripture but that would risk such distortion or diminishment, it is better to recast it in a contemporary setting, leaving the scriptural resonances behind. It may very well work there, and to the benefit of your students.