



## A Method of Contemplation from The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola

Contemplation means different things in different schools of spirituality. For St. Ignatius, it meant becoming personally present through the imagination to an event in the life of Christ.

The goal of this type of prayer is to come to know Christ intimately and personally. Besides developing the sense of a real and ongoing relationship with Jesus, this sort of imaginative encounter allows us to appropriate the vision and approach that Jesus has to life and the world, and to increasingly act out of this vision. This sort of contemplative view of life is the work of grace. The intent of the imaginative exercise is to open ourselves to receive this grace.

This is a form of prayer that requires some degree of solitude and silence. As such, many do not find it useful for daily prayer, but use it when they have more time and fewer distractions. The prayer period itself takes more than a few minutes, but should not last more than an hour.

Ignatius teaches this method by asking people to pray on the infancy of Jesus. Therefore the method will be presented here using the text for the contemplation on the nativity. Any gospel scene can be used.

### Contemplation on the Nativity

"In the preparatory prayer, I will ask the Lord for the grace that all my thoughts, words and actions may be directed purely to the praise and service of God."

*"First Prelude:* This is the history of the mystery..."

Here one reads carefully the text from scripture, in this case Luke 2:1-14.

*"Second Prelude:* This is a mental representation of the place..."

Here you go back in your imagination to the time and the place and set the scene, using the scraps of information from the scriptural text and supplementing it with your imagination. In this case you see the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the busy town of Bethlehem, the stable where Jesus was born, etc. This prelude is essentially making the mental shift, guided by scripture, into the realm of the imagination.

*"Third Prelude:* This is to ask for what I desire. Here it will be to ask for a deep interior knowledge of the Lord, who has become human for me, that I may love and follow my Lord ever more closely."

The interior knowledge being asked for is not the kind of objective detached knowledge that you can get from study. It is more like the knowledge of love. It is given and not achieved, and so you must be explicit about asking for it. The goal of the entire exercise is expressed in this third

prelude. If you are not sure that this interior knowledge and discipleship is what you really desire, you should still ask sincerely for it, since the asking can awaken the desire.

To this point, the activity has been preparatory, and essentially your activity. The aim of the preludes as a whole is to dispose you to open your mind and imagination to the influence of grace, that is, to the insights and experiences that God wants to give you. As preparations, they should not take a long time.

*"Points: this will consist in seeing the persons..., to consider, observe and contemplate what the persons are saying..., to see and consider what they are doing... Then I will reflect and draw some spiritual fruit from what I have seen."*

This is the main part of the exercise. It is essential that you insert yourself into the scene, Ignatius suggests as a "poor, unworthy, little servant." You are present to the event, not only as a passive observer, but can interact with the characters, in this case, Mary, Joseph and the baby. The interaction can take the form of conversation (which is particularly poignant in later scenes in the gospel when you converse with Jesus). It can involve action, for example, assisting Mary at the birth and holding the child. It can involve simple presence, but it is the presence of being in a room with people you know, rather than looking in the window.

As in all prayer, this exercise requires a letting go. It is a natural inclination to try to control the imagination in order to get the results you would like. The challenge is to allow the imagination to operate spontaneously, so that the images are given. They then possess a quality that is different from daydreams, for example, and you will know when it happens. The presupposition of this entire exercise is that the Holy Spirit will use our imagination, entering into it to speak to our hearts when we surrender control.

Despite its simplicity, many people who underrate their imagination do find this kind of prayer challenging. However, the imagination is a faculty which is as necessary to our functioning as the intellect, and everyone has one. In our dreams the imagination gives us access to a deeper level of ourselves than we are normally conscious of. Similarly, in contemplation the imagination can be a means of God's communicating deeper realities to us.

Ignatius speaks about drawing spiritual fruit. This does not mean drawing out the moral, ideological or factual implications. Rather it is more of a relishing of the experience, allowing it to mold our inner dispositions and attitudes.

*"This exercise should be closed with a colloquy..."*

A colloquy is simply a conversation. Ignatius specifies that it is made "by speaking exactly as one friend speaks to another." So one can spend a brief time in intimate conversation with Jesus, or Mary, or God the Father. This is an appropriate time to express one's desires, gratitude or needs.

*"Conclude with the Lord's Prayer"*