

Gospel Contemplation

The early Christians did not waste a lot of energy looking back and wishing they had been born a hundred years earlier so they could have walked with Jesus. Instead they focused on coming to know Christ in three powerful ways: through the sacraments, especially the Eucharist; the stories and emerging writings about Jesus; and his powerful presence when they gathered in his name.

Saint Ignatius Loyola invited a person, when an individual made a retreat in the pattern of his Spiritual Exercises, to pray to come to know Christ so that one may love him in a more real way. Then, following from this knowledge and love, one is to become a more faithful disciple.

In order to grow in this faith knowledge, Ignatius invited the retreatant to engage in a prayer method called contemplation. This is not some kind of mystical prayer but a prayer form in which one uses his or her senses in an imaginative way to reflect on a Gospel passage. One uses the senses, seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, and smelling to make the Gospel scene real and alive.

Here is a way of engaging in this prayer form, which is relaxing and rather easy.

1. Select a passage from one of the Gospels in which Jesus is interacting with others.
2. Recall what one is doing in engaging with the Word of God and what one desires from this encounter. God is present and because God is present one relies on God.
3. Read the Gospel passage twice so that the story and the details of the story become familiar.
4. Close one's eyes and reconstruct the scene in one's imagination. See what is going on and watch the men and women in the scene. What does Jesus look like? How do the others react to him? What are the people saying to one another? What emotions fill their words? Is Jesus touching someone? As one enters into the scene, sometimes there is the desire to be there. So a person can place oneself in the scene, perhaps as an observer, as one lining up for healing, or as one helping others to Jesus.
5. Some people's imaginations are very active so they construct a movie-like scenario with a Gospel passage. Others will enter the scene with verbal imagination, reflecting on the scene and mulling over the actions. Vividness is not a criterion for the effectiveness of this kind of prayer. Engagement is and the result is a more interior knowledge of Jesus.
6. As one finishes this time of prayer, one should take a moment to speak person to person with Christ saying what comes from the heart.