

Praying with Scripture

By Douglas J. Leonhardt, SJ

Lectio Divina and Gospel Contemplation are two ways to pray with Scripture. Fr. Leonhardt explains these two forms of prayer for those new to the practices.

My Seventh Day Adventist paternal grandmother was very faithful to reading the Bible every day until cataracts dimmed her eyes so she could no longer read. My Catholic maternal grandparents faithfully prayed the rosary every evening. Up until Vatican II these prayer forms were often the practices which designated people as Protestants or Catholics. But the Council urged all Catholics to return to Scripture as a way of “learning the surpassing knowledge of Jesus Christ.”• (Phil 3:8)

Over the past forty years some Catholics have hesitated to read Scripture privately because they did not feel they knew enough about the Bible. But this reason for avoiding the reading of Scripture is a temptation because it puts the focus on the individual and not on Christ. The truth is that we have a teacher in the Holy Spirit whom Christ promised and we received at Baptism. “I have said these things to you while still with you; but the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all I have said to you.” (John 14:25-26)

There are two easy ways to pray with Scripture. One is called in Latin, *Lectio Divina*, (Holy Reading) and the other is Gospel Contemplation.

Lectio Divina

This method of prayer goes back to the early monastic tradition. There were not bibles for everyone and not everyone knew how to read. So the monks gathered in chapel to hear a member of the community reading from the scripture. In this exercise they were taught and encouraged to listen with their hearts because it was the Word of God that they were hearing.

When a person wants to use *Lectio Divina* as a prayer form today, the method is very simple. When one is a beginner, it is better to choose a passage from one of the Gospels or epistles, usually ten or fifteen verses. Some people who regularly engage in this method of prayer choose the epistle or the Gospel for the Mass of the day as suggested by the Catholic Church.

First one goes to a quiet place and recalls that one is about to listen to the Word of God. Then one reads the scripture passage aloud to let oneself hear with his or her own ears the words. When one finishes reading, pause and recall if some word or phrase stood out or something touched one’s heart. If so, pause and savor the insight, feeling, or understanding. Then go back and read the passage again because it will have a fuller meaning. Pause again and note what happened. If one wants to dialogue with God or Jesus in response to the word, one should follow the prompting of one’s heart. This kind of reflective listening allows the Holy Spirit to deepen awareness of God’s taking the initiative to speak with us.

Lectio Divina can also be an effective form for group prayer. After a passage is read, there can be some extended silence for each person to savor what he or she has heard, particularly noting whether any word or phrase became a special focus of attention. Sometimes groups invite members, if they so desire, to share out loud the word or phrase that struck them. This is done without discussion. Then a different person from the group would read the passage again with a pause for silence. Different emphases might be suggested after each reading: What gift does this passage lead me to ask from the Lord? What does this passage call me to do? The prayer can be concluded with an Our Father.

Whether one prays individually or in a group, *Lectio Divina* is a flexible and easy way to pray. One first listens, notes what is given and responds in a way one is directed by the Holy Spirit.

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 and following from this knowledge and love 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 criteria 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.

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The above article can be found at: <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-what-how-why-of-prayer/praying-with-scripture>

The Ignatian Method

We often think of imagination as child's play, something to be forgotten upon reaching adulthood. We watch children fondly as they become completely immersed in faraway worlds. Yet perhaps we can learn something from children. They have a knack for putting themselves inside stories, a skill that adults often lack. Yet why is the imagination something we must leave behind with childhood? God gave it to us as much as he gave us logic, reason, and practicality. The Ignatian method of Scripture engagement gives us the opportunity to engage our imaginations by placing ourselves in the stories of Scripture in an attempt to better empathize with the people of the Bible and understand the stories in a more experiential way.

St. Ignatius created a daily devotional called the “Spiritual Exercises” to help people grow closer to God. It was a short guidebook on prayer based on Ignatius’ most profound spiritual experiences. The most common use for his book was as a guide for someone leading an intensive 30-day long retreat. This time would be spent meditating on the life of Christ, specifically his birth, public ministry, death, and resurrection, using the Ignatian method.

The Ignatian method of Scripture engagement allows us to connect with Scripture personally. The idea is to place yourself in the biblical story, becoming a person in the crowd, a disciple or the boy with the loaves and fish. Imagine the sights, sounds, smells, feels, and tastes of this ancient world. You step into the story and let it enter your mind, not just a series of facts, but as a story with actual characters who felt and experienced life. This method is especially helpful for those who tend to connect to Scripture on a purely cognitive level. It involves our emotions, enveloping our whole person. With the Ignatian method, you are no longer just reading a book, you are living a story. God has given us the biblical stories so we can connect with them on all levels so we can know who he is and what he cares about.

A word of caution is needed here (some of you may have already had concerns spring up in your mind about this Scripture engagement practice). Some would argue that our imagination is fallen and that we should not come to Scripture using our imagination at all, only our intellect. It is true that our imagination is fallen and that it can lead us into sin and deception. Who has not experienced a deceitful imagination? But the truth is that our intellect is also fallen and that it also can lead us into sin and deception. We must be careful with all aspects of our lives (thoughts, feelings, imagination, actions, relationships), measuring all against God’s Word.

Though the Ignatian method can be deeply engaging and helpful, we must be discerning during the practice to not let our imaginations run ahead of us, supposing that everything we can imagine is what a passage actually means. Christianity is a faith rooted in history, and we should be on guard against inventing biblical meanings for ourselves. The Ignatian method is not a good tool to understand the meaning of a passage. To understand the meaning of a passage, we must study it inductively following the rules of interpretation (see the article on [Scripture Engagement Compared to Bible Study](#) for more details). Instead, our hope is that we will use the Ignatian method to penetrate a passage more holistically. We do not want to turn the Bible into a subjective, individualistic experience for which it was never intended. The Ignatian method is a way to better empathize with the people of the Bible and understand it in a more experiential way and is especially helpful with biblical stories we are very familiar with.

The Ignatian method, when done with a proper emphasis upon what the text actually says, can be very powerful in helping us develop a heart for God. The Holy Spirit works in amazing ways when we humble ourselves and come to the Bible ready to learn and be changed. The Ignatian method requires us, in some ways, to come like children, awakening our imaginations to help us engage with God’s Word. Remember, the goal of Scripture engagement is always to let the truth of Scripture marinate into our lives so that we can enjoy meaningful spiritual growth and fellowship with God.

Ignatian Method Practice Tips

Each time of prayer and meditation in the Ignatian method follows the same basic pattern:

1. **Begin**—Take time to consider God’s presence and love for you. Kneel, sit, bow, however you wish to be comfortable for your time of prayer.
2. **Preparatory Prayer**—Offer God your time and focus. Ask for any grace you need during this time (peace, consolation, hope, focus etc.).
3. **Contemplate the Biblical Story:** choose a story from the Bible and use it to do the following:
 - **Read the text:** Read the text slowly, truly taking time to understand what is happening in the story. Take time as soon as you are done to recall what occurred in the story.

- **Place yourself inside the text:** Use your imagination and place yourself in the story. Pretend you are one of the characters or place yourself in the story as an independent character that interacts with the others in the text.
 - **Participate:** Become part of the scene. Talk to the other characters in the story and interact with them.
 - **Observe:** Look around. What is happening around you? Where are you? Think about the sensory experience during this time. What does the place, feel, sound, look, smell like. Try to really imagine it. Also, gain a sense of who these people are. Why are they here, what are they doing, and what does that tell us about them? Remember, ground your imaginings in the text, but feel free to explore it. This takes practice, but becomes easier with time.
 - **Dialogue with the characters:** Ask yourself: What are those around me saying, to each other and to me? What do I say to them? What is our discussion like?
 - **Notice what is going on inside you:** Ask yourself what you're feeling as you interact with the text in this way. Are you happy? Joyful? Full of sorrow? Peaceful? Confused? Full of love?
4. **Colloquy:** Have a short personal conversation with Jesus. Pretend that he is right there next to you and you are having a face-to-face conversation with a close friend.
 5. **Closing Prayer:** Conclude with a prayer of your choice. You may stand, kneel, bow, raise your hands, etc.

When you have finished this practice review what you have experienced. Journaling is a great way to record your feelings and to help you remember what you experienced. Decide when you finish when you will engage in this practice again and look forward to it. Prepare for your next encounter and decide what passage you will use as well as where you will spend your time.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- Many people find it helpful to begin this practice with stories about Jesus from the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). You can do it with any biblical story, but the Gospels are a good place to start.
- If you get distracted during this process, do not be frustrated. Ask God for help and focus, and set your mind back on the text. It takes practice to become good at these kinds of things.
- Remember to gain your facts from the text. Think about what it says about what is happening, and make sure that your imaginings line up with what the Bible actually says. Your imagination is a tool to help you experience God's Word, and God's Word must always be primary in this practice.
- Enjoy yourself. The imagination is a rich, wonderful vehicle or tool for exploration. Feel free to get lost in the beauty and truth of the biblical stories.

The Ignatian Method Resources

BOOKS

The Fire of the Word: Meeting God on Holy Ground by Chris Webb

Chris Webb, who has been deeply impacted by the Ignatian method, discusses this Scripture engagement practice specifically in Chapter 9 of his book. He tells his story and then explains the history of the exercises, the rationale behind it, and its benefit. This is a very strong and clear resource on the Ignatian Method.

The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in Daily Life by Kevin O'Brian, SJ

Want to go deeper with St. Ignatius and his exercises? This book provides a guide for those who wish to experience more of the exercises than just their engagement with Scripture. It acts, in a sense, as a kind of modern day version of the spiritual exercises. The book can be used individually or by those who wish to do retreats. Though it does not talk about the Scripture engagement method very deeply, it allows one to get more of a sense of St. Ignatius' exercises as a whole.

OTHER RESOURCES

The Picture-It Method of Bible Meditation by Rick Warren

Rick Warren's simple explanation of the Ignatian method is quite brief and to the point. He discusses the reasoning behind the method and is very oriented toward people finding Jesus in the Scriptures. His instructions are clear, helpful, and no-nonsense in nature.

Ignatian Bible Study

Simple, short, and detailed, this is a solid source explaining the Ignatian method. It recommends not only picturing the scene in your mind but physically acting it out. If you are looking for a brief overview of the topic, this source is for you.

Imaginative Contemplation

This website provides podcasts that lead you through a number of biblical stories using the Ignatian method. The podcasts guide your thoughts, both in imagining and in applying the story.

Ignatianspirituality.com

This extensive website provides a look at Ignatian exercises today, including a page specifically dedicated to Ignatius's way of interacting with Scripture. The site as a whole has many more facets than just this, and would be good for those who wish to explore the process more deeply.

The Ignatian Method of Bible Study

This site provides a clear lesson plan for practicing the Ignatian method in a group setting. It is very brief, but provides enough description to guide the leader through the process. It would probably be good for a leader to be somewhat familiar with the method before following this lesson plan.

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Praying the Ignatian Way

by Joe Paprocki, D.Min.

Despite the fact that your life can be hectic at times, you don't need to go to a monastery or search for a deserted place in the woods in order to pray. You simply need to make a transition of focus so that you can become more in tune with God's presence in your activities. St. Ignatius of Loyola taught a form of reflective prayer, also known as meditation, that invites you to use your mind and imagination to engage in prayerful conversation with God and to recognize his presence in your daily life. Reflective prayer involves the following simple steps.

- *Find a quiet place where you can be alone for 10 or 15 minutes.*

Assume a comfortable position and, if you wish, close your eyes or focus on a religious picture or a lighted candle. If you wish, play soft background music to help establish a prayerful mood. Become aware of God's presence and ask the Holy Spirit to guide your prayer.

- *Take 2 or 3 minutes to practice rhythmic breathing*

Counting to three slowly and silently while breathing in and counting slowly to five while breathing out—to help concentration. If you become distracted, return to concentrating on your breathing and let the distractions go by so that you can turn your heart back to God. Likewise, you can choose a special word or phrase, such as *Jesus* or *My Lord and My God*, and repeat it when you are distracted to bring your attention back to God's presence.

- *Select a brief passage from Scripture and prayerfully read it.*

If the passage you select is a Gospel story, use your five senses to imagine yourself as a participant in the story (What can you see? What sounds do you hear? What can you feel?). Imagine a setting in which you can talk with Jesus and listen to him speak to you. You can respond to what Jesus is saying or doing in the story, or you can simply talk about something that has happened to you recently or about a forthcoming event in your life.

- *In addition to using Scripture in your reflection, you can also use writings from or about the saints as well as other inspirational literature or prayer books.*

Likewise, you can choose to concentrate on a sacred object such as a crucifix, or reflect on a sacred image, such as an icon of Jesus or a favorite saint. Take this time to talk to God as you would to a friend.

- *Close with one or two minutes of contemplation, time to rest silently in God's presence.*

As adults, we come to recognize more and more that God speaks to us using the language of silence. Take a few moments at the end of your reflection to enter into a few silent moments with God.

Through reflective prayer you can begin to more readily recognize God's presence in your daily life.

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