

Ignatian Prayer?

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Introduction

Ignatius would be unhappy with the term 'Ignatian Prayer' if it were used to label some forms of prayer as Ignatian, to the exclusion of others. For him, it is the Holy Spirit who teaches us in prayer, by leading us as he wills. Ignatius saw his own role as that of the 'prompter' who hints at possible ways of proceeding in prayer. The role of the guide in the Spiritual Exercises is to help the retreatant to notice and follow the drawing of the Holy Spirit: the ways in which the retreatant prays is secondary to the goal of meeting God.

However, granted the above reservations, some of the characteristics of what is known as 'Ignatian Prayer' are as follows:

- **Deep love for Jesus Christ.** Imaginative Contemplation is a help to this. In this form of prayer the Spirit enables the winning over of the total person to the person of the Lord. There is a delicate transforming of imagination, vision, memory, mind, will, affectivity, emotions, even the body. A person is 'made over' to the Lord. St Paul speaks twice of a 'new creation' when a person's life is centred on Christ (2 Cor 5:17; Gal 6:15).
- **Loving Service.** The mysticism of Ignatius has been termed a mysticism of service, rather than of contemplation alone. 'Lord, what would you have me do?' - This is the attitude of Mary, of Jesus, of Paul and of all the saints. Ignatius' simple desire was to serve or help others. The focus of discernment, another key Ignatian concept, is on deciding just how best to serve.
- **Seeking and finding God in All Things.** This endless dynamic is played out in the Examen (see below). The capacity to find God in all one does is the source of great consolation – it brings a deep joy, no matter how demanding the work or the suffering may be.

The Beginnings of Prayer

The little book of the Exercises is full of hints about prayer, and these help people who are starting out on their spiritual journey. Ignatius himself had to learn the art of disposing himself for meeting God, and he offers well-proven methods drawn from the tradition he had received at Montserrat and elsewhere. Among these hints are the following: the numbers refer to the Exercises.



- **Bodily Reverence:** Begin the prayer, not casually but in a formal way by standing or kneeling (75-76). An attentive sitting would surely be acceptable too!
- **Notice** how God sees you (75). A French mystic's phrase may help to get things right here: *'You gazed on me and you smiled.'*
- **Ask** for what you desire, and seek Our Lady's help (48, 63 etc). Desire is crucial: it fuels our prayer, and without it we drift. Deepest down is our simple yearning for God.
- **Imagine** the scene (47, 92, 112 etc). Engage with the mystery you are preparing to pray about (74, 78-81, 127-130). Compose yourself within the story: speak with the persons in it (114-117).
- **Use your gifts** of memory, understanding and will. Recall the facts or the events; try to understand them; rouse your will to desire what you need (50, etc)
- **Speak with** the Lord as one friend with another – the 'colloquy' means a face to face conversation (53, 54, 61, 71 etc). Ignatian prayer is relational, an 'I-Thou' encounter, not a spectator event. God is engaging with me, so in return I try to engage *with* God rather than thinking *about* God (or other things!).
- **Perseverance:** Stay with the time you have decided, even if the prayer time seems wasted (12, 13). Perhaps time alone is all you can give, but that is enough. It is a sign of generosity: you wait and wait until God shows up. This shows that you are putting God first.
- **Closure:** End the prayer formally, with the Our Father (54)
- **Review** the prayer: *What went on, and what am I to learn from this?* (77, also 6, 7, 17). Notice the play of emotions – of consolation and desolation – which are the language of the spirit. Out of this review emerges repetition, which is a returning to where God may wish to draw me again (118-120).
- The **prayer of the senses** is offered to help a retreatant to rest gently in what has been given (121). It is a delicate savouring of the presence of God. Taste and see that the Lord is sweet (Ps 19:10 etc).
- **The Examen:** We will treat of the Examen in the following Lesson. No prayer is more characteristic of Ignatius than this. It is an invaluable help to anyone engaged in a busy life, who wants to keep in touch with God and be led by the good Spirit.

'Keep God Before Your Eyes!'

Few people find prayer easy: most of us wonder if our prayer has any value, and we would dearly wish that it might go better. The desire to pray better is good, but deception occurs when I imagine that methods and techniques alone will produce improved performance. I cannot control the encounter between God and myself. God does not engage with me in prayer in the ways I want, but in the ways God sees best.



The Spirit blows where it wishes, and as Hopkins puts it: 'I greet him the days I meet him and bless when I understand.' Thus Ignatius, who could be so well-ordered in every area of life, left no instructions about how formed Jesuits were to pray, except to ask them always to **'keep God before their eyes'** (*Formula of the Institute n.3*). The fragments of Ignatius' *Spiritual Diary*, 1544-1545, are a silent testimony to the prayer that went on in him, a prayer we

term 'mystical' because God is clearly leading the dance. Our own efforts in 'keeping God before our eyes' whether through quiet or noisy contemplation, are also exercises in a practical, if rather 'messy' mysticism.

Relational: Note that Ignatian prayer is relational: it is not a one-way event in which I do everything, nor is it a spectator event in which I am not personally engaged. Nor yet is it only a quiet contemplation of the Beloved though this obviously will be a dimension of my prayer. Rather, God and I are intimately engaged with one another, wrestling or dancing or companionably silent.

Awesome: Ignatian prayer is Trinitarian in its scope. Its key image is given in the Exercises (101-109) where I join the three Divine Persons who contemplate our world, and determine to save it. They enlist my help. The focus then becomes Christo-centric: *'I will beg for grace to follow and imitate more closely Our Lord who has just become human for me'* (109). God as Father is an awesome figure for Ignatius: Creator, Lord, Divine Majesty! (Exx 15, 16). In a democratic age when everyone is levelled down to manageable size, we have to labour to regain a proper appreciation of God as 'the Mystery who is both attractive and awesome' in Rudolf Otto's phrase.



Petitionary: Another dimension of prayer for Ignatius is petition: 'I ask for what I want.' This might seem to some a second-class mode of prayer. Certainly, if used exclusively, it misses the point about the range of Ignatian prayer, but it does acknowledge the helpless need and yet the intimacy of the creature before God. It highlights Ignatius' operative theology; that is, he has a huge confidence in God as **provident**. If God calls me into his service and sends me on my mission, God must

provide me with what is needed.

True Prayer: For Ignatius, there is no ascending ladder of prayer. Different ways will help at different times. Do we 'make progress in prayer'? Perhaps, but not by virtue of

reaching 'higher states' of prayer, but rather by our growing ability to 'find God in all things.' Anybody can join in searching for God in ordinary circumstances, whether child or busy adult or terminally ill patient.

Ignatius would judge the authenticity of your prayer not by what went on within it, but by its fruits. What fruits? A growing gratitude to God for his goodness, leading to the desire '**to love and serve in all things**' (Exx 233). If that desire is developing in your heart, then prayer is going on in you; you are being made over to God; you are becoming like the Son in relation to his Father: you are open to the action of the Spirit, you are available for service. The single goal in Ignatian terms is 'to find God in all things.' He would have agreed, we may think, with Nadal's term 'contemplative in action.' This means that you keep your eye on God in the midst of activity, and keep God's agenda in mind in every circumstance.

We have looked in Lesson Two above at the interplay between God, God's world and yourself. To be willingly in that interplay is to be a person of real prayer. To have a right sense of God, and of yourself in relation to God, and to be open to play your part in the world as God wishes - this is to be living out the divine life within you.

When you allow yourself to be caught up into the divine dream for yourself and for the world, your reality is that of being-in-love -- and you know it! As the three divine Persons are totally *for-one-another* and *for-us*, you become *for-God* and *for-all-others*. The simple word 'for' carries a wealth of meaning: God is reaching out to me and I am reaching out to God and others. We are 'for' one another. There are no prescriptions for this. A wise guide will not get in the way, but will be unobtrusively available to listen and to offer advice when obstacles arise or this dynamic is inhibited.

The point in all of this is that while Ignatius could be highly prescriptive in helping beginners to prepare for the dynamics of their relationship which God, his goal is to help them experience God for themselves, and then stand back. '*Allow God to deal directly with the creature, and the creature with its creator and Lord*' (Exx 15).

Prayer, for Ignatius, is not a searching for a distant God but a recognising of the God who impresses himself on us through all things. God is trying to contact us. All is from God; the divine is all around in every detail of creation. Wake up, Ignatius would whisper, open your eyes, notice God, and respond!

Action as Prayer

A unique dimension of Ignatius' view of prayer is that when I am doing what I believe God wants me to do, that is itself prayer. He would say that we can find God no less in action done at God's invitation than in silent prayer. This is consoling for those who have to live busy lives.

The Godward orientation of Ignatius' whole life of work, prayer, and relationships is glimpsed in the Constitutions where he is describing how the General of the Society should shape his day. '*The general ought to employ the time which his health and energies allow him, **partly with God, partly with... officials and helpers... and partly with himself** in privately reflecting and thinking out and deciding what should be done with the help and favour of God our Lord*' (809). God is in charge!

Discernment

If Ignatius would say that action done at God's invitation is itself prayer, we have to engage in the process of discernment to see what God's invitation actually is. This is where 'seeking God' comes in. If a choice between worthwhile options has to be made, to which of them is God leading me? We have already noted Ignatius' own first

experiences of noticing God's action on his heart, and how one set of thoughts brought him consolation and the other brought desolation. We will look at discernment in the two following Lessons to see how our experience of these heart movements can guide us in making choices.

Reflection

Looking at your own prayer, what advice do you imagine Ignatius might offer you?

Recommended reading

Barry, W A., SJ: 'Prayer as Conscious Relationship' in Traub, G W., SJ, ed: *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008, 99-103

Burghardt, W J., SJ: 'Contemplation: A Long, Loving Look at the Real' in Traub, G W., SJ, ed: *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008, 89-98

Gallagher T., OMV: An Ignatian Introduction to Prayer: Scriptural Reflections according to the Spiritual Exercises. [Note: The OMV, Oblates of the Virgin Mary, are a religious community dedicated to retreats and spiritual formation according to the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius of Loyola]

Gallagher T., OMV: *Meditation and Contemplation: An Ignatian Guide to Praying with Scripture.*

Veale, J., SJ: *Manifold Gifts.* Oxford: Way Books, 2006, essays 1, 2, 8, 9

Note: This Article was adapted from the ["Ignatian Spirituality and Leadership Course"](#) by Fr. Brian Grogan, SJ