

Excerpt from ***What Is Ignatian Spirituality?*** by David L. Fleming, SJ.

Ignatius would never have thought of himself as a highly educated intellectual. He had an advanced degree from the University of Paris, the finest university in Europe at the time. He was well-acquainted with the ideas of leading philosophers and theologians. He was an excellent analytical thinker.

But the mental quality of thought that drove his spiritual life was his remarkable imagination. His imagination played a central role in his conversion. Through his many years of directing others he discovered how useful the imagination could be in fostering a deeper relationship with God. Imaginative prayer is recognized as one of the hallmarks of **Ignatian spirituality**.

Ignatius first grasped the importance of the imagination during his long convalescence from his battle injuries. His key insights about God came through his imagination. The notes he took as he read about the life of Christ filled a 300-page notebook that he treasured for the rest of his life. The lives of the saints inspired him with noble thoughts of what he might do with his life. He told himself "St. Dominic did this, therefore I must do it. St. Francis did this, therefore I must do it." Ignatius then daydreamed about feats of knightly valor and romantic adventures. His idle daydreams alternated between the two.

But these daydreams were not idle at all. His romantic dreams left him restless and discontented. His thoughts of imitating the saints left him cheerful and satisfied. Gradually he understood that spiritual forces lay behind his different feelings. He wrote of himself: "he came to recognize the difference between the two spirits that moved him, the one being from the evil spirit, the other from God." This breakthrough in understanding the source of his feelings is the foundation of the process of **Ignatian discernment**. It was an insight he reached by using his imagination.

He continued to make liberal use of the imagination and integrated imaginative prayer into the approach to the spiritual life that he outlined in the **Spiritual Exercises**. In his hands, the imagination becomes a tool to help us know and love God.

Ignatius presents two ways of imagining in the Spiritual Exercises. The first way is demonstrated in a meditation on the mystery of the Incarnation in the second week of the exercises. He asks us to “enter into the vision of God.” God is looking down on our turbulent world. We imagine God’s concern for the world. We see God intervening by sending Jesus into the maelstrom of life. This type of imagining helps us see things from God’s perspective and take on God’s qualities of love, compassion, and understanding.

The second method of imagining is to place ourselves fully within a story from the Gospels. We become onlooker-participants and give full rein to our imagination. Jesus is speaking to a blind man at the side of the road. We feel the hot Mediterranean sun beating down. We smell the dust kicked up by the passersby. We feel the itchy clothing we’re wearing, the sweat rolling down our brow, a rumble of hunger. We see the desperation in the blind man’s face and hear the wail of hope in his words. We note the irritation of the disciples. Above all we watch Jesus—the way he walks, his gestures, the look in his eyes, the expression on his face. We hear him speak the words that are recorded in the Gospel. We go on to imagine other words he might have spoken and other deeds he might have done.

The best-known example of this use of the imagination in the Spiritual Exercises is the contemplation on Jesus’ birth in the second week. Ignatius suggests that we imagine “the labors of the journey to Bethlehem, the struggles of finding a shelter, the poverty, the thirst, the hunger, the cold, the insults that meet the arrival of God-with-us.” In the course of the Exercises, Ignatius proposes many such scenes from the Gospels for imaginative contemplation. He chooses scenes of Jesus acting rather than Jesus teaching or telling parables. He wants us to see Jesus interacting with others, Jesus making decisions, Jesus moving about, Jesus ministering. He doesn’t want us to *think* about Jesus. He wants us to *experience* him. He wants Jesus to fill our senses. He wants us to meet him.

Following Jesus is the business of our lives. To follow him we must know him, and we get to know him through our imagination. Imaginative Ignatian prayer teaches us things about Jesus that we would not learn through scripture study or theological reflection. It allows the person of Christ to penetrate into places that the intellect does not touch. It brings Jesus into our hearts. It engages our feelings. It enflames us with ideals of generous service.

Imaginative prayer makes the Jesus of the Gospels *our* Jesus. It helps us develop a unique and personal relationship with him. We watch Jesus’ face.

We listen to the way he speaks. We notice how people respond to him. These imaginative details bring us to know Jesus as more than a name or a historical figure in a book. He is a living person. We say what the villagers in John's Gospel told the Samaritan woman: "We have come to know him ourselves, and not just from your report."