

Christof Wolf, S.J.

The Moment Is For Me

An Ignatian Guide to Prayer

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IGNATIAN WAYS OF PRAYER

In the Exercises, the exercitant is invited to pray for an hour four times during the day. Ignatius developed a precise method. The following texts in italics are from his book of Exercises. For contemporary readers, they may sound harsh, but they give us a good impression of his style.

It [the exercise] comprises a preparatory prayer and two preludes, three main points, and a colloquy.

THE PREPARATORY PRAYER IS: to ask God our Lord for the grace that all my intentions, actions, and activities be purely directed to the service and praise of his divine majesty.

THE FIRST PRELUDE IS: composition by seeing the place. Here note: ... when one considers Christ our Lord ... the composition will consist in seeing the physical place with the eye of imagination ... for example, a temple or mountain where Jesus is.

THE SECOND PRELUDE IS: to ask God our Lord for what I want and wish. The request must correspond to the underlying material. This means: when the meditation concerns the resurrection, to ask God for joy with Christ joyful; when it concerns the Passion, to ask for anguish, tears, and torment with the tormented Christ.

THE MAIN POINTS ARE: to see, observe, and consider what the persons are saying. To reflect on myself and draw some profit from it. See and consider what they are doing, for example, wandering and taking pains for the Lord to be born in the greatest poverty, and all this for me. Afterwards, by reflecting on myself, draw some spiritual profit from it.

AT THE END A COLLOQUY SHALL BE MADE by reflecting on what I should say to the three divine persons or to the incarnate Word or to our Lady and Mother. According to how one feels [it] within, ask our Lord, who became human for me, [to let me] follow and imitate him more closely. Then pray an Our Father.

After selecting a Bible passage, one begins with the preparatory prayer, in which one asks for the inner orientation to God. In this dynamic, our own limitations get a new perspective: something new and unexpected can be given to me. I should ask for that and be ready for it. Making up one's own preparatory prayer can be a small initial spiritual exercise. The prayer doesn't always have to be completely new, as long as it accompanies one's path of prayer.

The process of praying begins with the scene, which one furnishes like a stage or a film set. I imagine a concrete place corresponding to the content of the selected Bible passage. Each place has its own atmosphere: it feels wide or narrow, comfortable or threatening, warm or cold, and has its own distinctive odor.

It is easy to get lost in one's fantasy, since Ignatius brings us actively into the scene. I should not ask for just anything, but for the gift of feeling the scene. Real empathy speaks to my emotions and has the potential to change me and give me new perspectives.

Once the stage setting or film location is ready, I consider who is there to see. What are the actors saying? What especially speaks to me?

Actions follow words. Now begins the inner film, the main part of the exercise. Like a director or cameraman, I shape my own film. I can let myself speak with the persons, interact with them, grasp them, touch them, or just let myself observe them. Ignatius's recommendation to "reflect on myself" means that I let my emotions really encounter the story. Thus it can make me laugh or cry. And in spite of precise planning, surprises keep coming up, just as in a real filming where the story gets a completely new ending.

Every prayer exercise closes with a short colloquy. One reviews the just-completed prayer and puts into words what the heart says, as though one were speaking to a good friend. As Ignatius recommends, one can speak to the Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Mary, or even to a person who was on the stage or film set. It's almost like what Heinrich von Kleist writes in his essay "On the Gradual Production of Thoughts While Speaking": "there is a strange source of inspiration for a speaker in the human face of the listener: a glance telling us that a half-expressed thought has already been understood often provides us the expression for the other half." One does not yet know exactly what to communicate, but the benevolent listener helps me formulate insights, desires, and requests that I would never come upon on my own. That's exactly what happens in conversation.

The conclusion is an “Our Father” — perhaps the oldest prayer of the church, taught by Jesus to his disciples. Praying from the heart means praying with the words of Jesus.

After the time of prayer, Ignatius recommends a short period of reflection, lasting about fifteen minutes. I review and reflect on what has happened, on what has been given me. What were the good experiences in the prayer? The irritating ones? It is helpful to keep a spiritual diary, lest nuances get forgotten. With a diary I can more easily recognize my life themes, and even discover a central thread.

A vivid analogy to the structure of Ignatian prayer is the invitation to a party. The preparatory prayer is my thinking about what to wear, what outfit suits the occasion and the host. After my arrival I first look around the place and orient myself. Now I have to decide what to do first: go to the bar and order a drink, greet friends, etc. Then the party begins for me. I listen, converse, laugh, until the party ends. On the way home I speak with my best friend about the party. Together we consider what we experienced, what especially touched us, what went especially well. At home I write down the most important experiences in my diary.

EVERYTHING WITHOUT PRESSURE

Ignatius’s instructions may seem somewhat complicated; they do demand some time for practice. Not for nothing are they called spiritual exercises. But an exercitant is also freed from the pressure that every effort must immediately be crowned with success. In the Exercises there are times of consolation, and times of dryness. Ever optimistic, Ignatius advises me in times of dryness to remember the times of consolation. People who see only the negative side of things will hardly ever experience a change. A good thing needs exercise, time, and patience: that is an old piece of folk wisdom, and also typically Ignatian. The “Full Exercises” are a classic example.

No matter how dense the exercise, one does not have to accomplish anything. I can stop my film anytime, and take a rest. Especially when I feel deep joy, beauty, harmony, consolation, sympathy, and love. In these moments, my soul is touched by God. For Ignatius, it comes down to intensity and fulfillment. It is not much knowledge that satisfies the soul, but feeling and tasting the things within. Thus it is consistent for Ignatius to recommend the repetition of each exercise, which often becomes more simple and intense the second time around. When I go to the cinema to see a film for the second time, I get a broader view and see many things that eluded me the first time.

A religious experience using all our senses opens the door to the deeper levels of our life. Above all, we are helped by imagining a scene, because that is where God is met. As Moses stood amazed before the burning bush, so can our imagination create places in which we encounter God. Consequently the first suggestion is always the invitation to pick our own scene. I can concretely imagine a desert, in order to encounter Jesus there. First I ask myself: how does the desert look? Is it a sandy desert, a thorny cactus desert, or more of a steppe? Is the sun shining? Is there a shady spot? Is it unbearably hot?

Before I dive into an exercise, I ask for the readiness to grow in my capacity for love, my capacity for sympathy. Opening myself up always makes me vulnerable and pliable. My sensitivity can see and feel the subtleties of a scene, and touch it with my own emotions.

Can I see Jesus? Perhaps he is only a small black dot on the horizon and I must open myself to seeking him. Do even I want to go into the desert, or do I feel inner resistance? Perhaps I also find myself sitting next to Jesus in the desert. I can lean on him, touch him, or let him touch me. Begin a conversation with him, perhaps finally ask Jesus what I always wanted to ask him. Laugh and cry with Jesus or just be with him. Perhaps walk together with him a bit, looking for water.

In this way prayer is a creative, dynamic, and open process. “My entire life is a receipt without my signature,” writes the Portuguese author Fernando Pessoa. Prayer stretches one out towards a future that one would like to realize, and that can be experienced only by doing. In this way of prayer the person praying receives something that is accessible only to himself and God, and that cannot be predicted.

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