



The Ignatian Method of Meditation

By Rev. Jordan Aumann, O.P.

When speaking of discursive mental prayer, it is only logical that the name of St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556) should head the list of spiritual masters. He is not the originator of discursive meditation or the spiritual exercises, but it is surely because of his revision and adaptation that they have been so widely practiced throughout the Catholic world. He defines spiritual exercises as "every kind of examination of conscience, meditation, contemplation, vocal and mental prayer, and other spiritual activities." He completed the final draft of his *Spiritual Exercises* in 1534 and they were approved by Pope Paul III in 1548.

Actually, St. Ignatius offers six methods



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of meditation in the *Spiritual Exercises*. Here we shall describe the method of meditation contained in the first week of the *Exercises*, which St. Ignatius called "meditation with the three powers." By that he means meditation in which one uses the three faculties of memory, intellect and will. The instructions given by St. Ignatius are very detailed, but that is to be expected at the beginning of the *Exercises*. Later, as the individual makes progress, the method of prayer can be simplified. In fact, St. Ignatius advises the director of the *Exercises* to let God work directly with the retreatant and the re-

treasant with God. He well knew that the Holy Spirit is the true director of the soul.

The retreatant is to spend one hour on the meditation provided for each day, and if tempted to cut it short, the retreatant should extend it beyond an hour. This is a typical Ignatian tactic: not simply to repel an attack, but to counterattack. In addition, the recollection during the meditation should be external (withdrawal from distractions of every kind) and internal (strict control over one's faculties and concentration on the topic of the meditation). Having said that, let us look at the steps in this first type of Ignatian meditation.

1. The evening before the meditation is to be made, one should consider the "points" of the meditation; that is, an outline or schema of the subject of meditation (St. Ignatius usually gives three points). If one uses a book of meditations, the points will be given there. Also, while considering the points, one should form an idea of what results are expected from the meditation.

2. Before going to sleep, one should think briefly of the hour at which one will rise and for what purpose: to resume the points of meditation.

Awaken to the Theme

3. As soon as one awakens in the morning, the mind should immediately advert to the theme of that day's meditation.

4. Just before beginning the hour of meditation, one must recollect oneself and place oneself in the presence of God. This can be done by making an act of faith, accompanied by some bodily gesture such as a genuflection or a bow.

5. Next comes the preparatory prayer, asking that all may be done for the greater glory of God. The prayer attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas is very suitable: "Grant me, most merciful God, that I may ardently desire, prudently examine and perfectly fulfill those things that are pleasing to you, to the praise and glory of your Holy Name."

6. Next come the three "Preludes," and their purpose is to introduce the topic of meditation. The first is the *historical* Prelude, which is used when meditating, for example, on a scene from the Gospel. One sets the scene, so to speak, by read-

ing the Gospel passage. The second Prelude is *imaginative* (or composition of place); namely, to see in one's imagination the entire setting when meditating on an event in the life of Christ. It is a kind of spiritual "time tunnel"; you are there. The third Prelude is *petition*: "To ask of God our Lord that which I wish and desire," says St. Ignatius. This should relate in some way to the topic of meditation.

The Meditation Proper

7. We now come to the meditation proper, in which one exercises memory, intellect and will. *Memory* is used to recall the details of the topic of meditation (e.g., the birth of Christ) and to take a closer look. This should stimulate an act of faith and an act of adoration. Next, the *intellect* reflects on the topic in order to understand it more deeply and to make an application to one's own life. What practical considerations should be drawn from the reflection on the subject matter? Finally, the *will* is moved to experience certain affections and to make resolutions. This is really the whole purpose of the meditation: to become a better Christian. However, two things should be kept in mind. First, it may sometimes happen that a meditation does not terminate in a resolution, but simply in a greater love of God. Second, we need not make a new resolution for each meditation. Sometimes one may find it necessary to work on one resolution over a period of time.

8. At the end of the meditation proper comes the *colloquy*. St. Ignatius says that it is made "just as one friend speaks to another, or a servant to his master." It is conversing with God as if we expected Him to answer us. It is here, logically, that the individual will make use of the prayer of petition, asking God for grace for oneself and for others.

9. After the meditation is finished, St. Ignatius advises the retreatant to make an "examen" for a quarter of an hour. Its purpose is to look back on the meditation just made; to see if it has gone well or badly. This check on oneself is typically Ignatian and it is especially important for beginners in the practice of prayer.

Suggested Reading: Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, ed. by D.L. Fleming, S.J., Institute of Jesuit Studies, St. Louis, Missouri, 1978.

Three Methods of Ignatian Prayer

By Rev. Jordan Aumann, O.P.

At the end of the *Spiritual Exercises*, St. Ignatius gives a detailed description of three methods of prayer that are especially suited for beginners; also for uneducated persons or those who for one reason or another cannot use the method previously described. These three methods are therefore much easier and simpler.

St. Ignatius states that the first method of prayer is about the Ten Commandments, the seven capital sins, the three faculties of the soul (memory, intellect and will), or the five external senses. Hence, it is a meditative examination of

topic you have chosen; for example, the Ten Commandments. Starting with the First Commandment, ask yourself how well you have kept it or where you have failed. If you find you have failed in this regard, ask God's pardon and then say the Our Father. Go through the rest of the Commandments in the same way. Or you may take as your topic the five external senses, checking to see whether you have used them in imitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and then end each step with a Hail Mary.

3. The sentiments aroused by this method of prayer should be sorrow for sin, repentance, and asking the grace to amend one's life. It ends with a colloquy or conversation with God.

Considering Every Word

The second method of prayer consists in a consideration of each word in a given prayer, e.g. the Our Father, the Hail Mary, the Apostles' Creed, one of the psalms, etc. Placing yourself in the presence of God, you address your petition to the one who is addressed in the formula of prayer; for example, if using the Our Father, you make your petition to Him. Then say the first word, "Father," and consider what that word means in itself, in relation to God, and in relation to you. St. Ignatius advises that you stay with a word as long as you find meanings, comparisons, affections and consolation. Then proceed to the next word and do the same. One does not have to do this with each and every word in the prayer, but may finish the prayer as usual. At the end there is the customary colloquy in which you ask for the particular graces you need. You should then finish the meditation with a few vocal prayers (Our Father, Hail Mary or Apostles' Creed) recited without pausing.

When using this second method of prayer, St. Ignatius says that one may assume whatever posture is best suited for concentration — kneeling, sitting, standing. He suggests that it is best to keep one's eyes closed or to fix them on one spot in order to avoid distractions. This method of prayer is especially recommended to those who have the habit of reciting their vocal prayers without attention or devotion. It is a type of medita-

tion that can be used in any number of situations such as traveling, waiting for an appointment, taking a walk, or just sitting.

The third method of prayer is an abbreviated form of the second method. After placing yourself in the presence of God and making your petition to Him, you take any one of the vocal prayers mentioned above (Our Father, Hail Mary, Apostles' Creed, a psalm, etc.). But you no longer take one word at a time and think about it; rather, you pronounce each word slowly, in rhythm with your breathing. As you pronounce each word in this way, you should think either of their meaning, of the person to whom the words are addressed, or of yourself (your spiritual needs or your relationship to the person addressed).

The second and third methods of prayer provide an easy transition from purely vocal prayer to the practice of mental prayer. As we shall see later, St. Teresa of Avila maintains that if one recites vocal prayer with attention and devotion, that is already mental prayer. But if one merely rattles off the words of a prayer, that person is not really praying.

Important Notice To Readers

In order to avoid any misunderstanding because of the forthcoming "Victorious Queen Peace Flight" to Russia, the Executive Committee of the World Apostolate of Fatima (Blue Army of Our Lady of Fatima, U.S.A. Inc.) passed a resolution at their executive meeting on June 17, 1992, which announces by way of a disclaimer any association with the Victorious Queen Peace Flight sponsored by the 101 Foundation.



Drawing by Ariel Agemian

Courtesy Confraternity of the Precious Blood

Through prayer, we unite ourselves to God and obtain the graces we need in our daily lives.

conscience, but not as detailed an examination as one makes prior to Confession. It does not focus on the sins committed during a given period; rather, it is a more general reflection on one of the foregoing topics in order to determine how one stands in relation to God. The procedure is as follows:

1. Place yourself in the presence of God and ask Him to grant you a better understanding of the topic of your examination, a greater awareness of your sins, and the grace to amend your life.
2. Proceed to the examination of the



Ignatian Contemplative Prayer

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It has often been asserted that St. Ignatius made no provision for contemplative prayer. He restricted his teaching exclusively to various forms of meditation, which is a discursive mental prayer. Consequently, Ignatian prayer focuses almost exclusively on the individual's self-examination, in which the intellect plays a predominant role. The next step for some persons is to conclude that St. Ignatius was opposed to contemplative prayer. But that is like saying that a theologian who writes a book on Christ has no devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary!

A Loving Gaze

Let us see what is meant by contemplative prayer. Then we can decide whether St. Ignatius taught any method of contemplation. The simplest definition of contemplation is that it is a type of prayer that consists in a loving gaze, as when a mother looks lovingly at her infant in the crib or a person contemplates a beautiful painting in an art museum. It is more than a quick glance. It is an attentive and loving gaze that produces love and joy. The faculties that come into play are memory, intellect and will, as is true of any authentic prayer. But there is this difference: the intellect does not reason and make a judgment as in discursive mental prayer or meditation. In contemplative prayer it is the activity of the will, the memory and the imagination that is predominant. Contemplative prayer is therefore more intuitive and affective than is meditation.

Christ is Central

The topics suggested by St. Ignatius for this type of prayer are the mysteries of the life, passion, death and glory of Christ. Those who are in the habit of praying the Rosary or the Stations of the Cross will understand at once what is meant by these "mysteries."

One begins this type of prayer as usual; namely, by placing oneself in the presence of God. One then selects a mystery such as the birth of Christ and recalls the Gospel story of that event (the historical prelude). Next, one proceeds to the "composition of place," setting the scene of the birth of Christ—the stable of the Nativity and the persons involved. This

is followed by the "prelude of petition." St. Ignatius lists three petitions that should always be made when contemplating a scene in the life of Christ: that one may know Christ better, love Him more deeply, and serve Him more faithfully.

Now one is ready to contemplate the mystery that was selected. This is done by reflecting on the persons involved in the mystery and their words and actions. Thus, in contemplating the birth



Rosary mysteries such as the Nativity are suggested by St. Ignatius as topics for contemplative prayer.

of Christ, the persons involved are the Infant Jesus, Mary and Joseph, the angels and the shepherds. St. Ignatius even allows one to fill in the places where the Gospel narrative is silent, as long as one does so prudently.

One should not, however, be a merely passive spectator of the scene or mystery. It is very important to imagine that the mystery of event is actually taking place here and now, and that one is actively involved in the event.

(In the Middle Ages many artists placed their patrons or some saint in a painting of the Nativity or the Crucifixion of Christ. Fra Angelico, for example, placed St. Dominic at the foot of the cross and at the crib in Bethlehem, as if to remind all Dominicans to enter into the mysteries of Christ's life and death.)

The contemplation of the mystery of Christ closes with the usual colloquy, which will be all the easier if one has truly entered into the spirit and meaning of the mystery that was contemplated. One will normally give expression to the affections and feelings that have been aroused. That being done, the contemplation ends with the recitation of the Our Father.

This type of prayer is called *acquired* contemplation, as distinct from *infused* or mystical contemplation. Note, however, that neither the one nor the other can rightly be called "extraordinary" in the sense of something charismatic. Both forms of contemplative prayer are within the normal development of the life of grace and charity. Acquired contemplation is the result of our own cooperation with grace and the intensity of our love. Infused contemplation is the result of the operation of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, who breathes where He will.

Prayer of the Heart

As we shall see later, there are many different names given to acquired contemplation: prayer of simple regard, prayer of simplicity, acquired recollection, intuitive prayer, prayer of silence, prayer of the heart or prayer of simple presence. The names are interchangeable, but the nature of the prayer remains the same. It is truly a contemplative type that can be practiced by anyone who is capable of gazing with love on the person of Christ, on one or another action that He performed for our salvation, or pondering the words of our divine Teacher. The same type of contemplative prayer may be used when reflecting on the mysteries of Mary or the life of some saint.

Acquired contemplative prayer can be practiced by anyone who is capable of gazing with love at the person of Christ.
