

Ignatian Spirituality – Part 1

St. Peter Claver (1580-1654) - was born to a prosperous family in Verdu, Spain, and earned his first degree in Barcelona. When he graduated he said “I must dedicate myself to the service of God until death, on the understanding that I am like a slave.” He entered the Jesuits in 1601. Shortly after his arrival, the doorkeeper of the college, Alphonsus Rodriguez, felt strongly that God’s mission for Peter was in the Americas and took every opportunity to tell Peter as much. Peter listened, and in 1610, after requesting that he be sent to the Americas, found himself in Cartagena, Colombia, one of two slave trading ports in South America. For six years, Peter continued his studies in Bogotá. In 1616, after his ordination, he continued the work of Father Alonso de Sandoval, S.J., who ministered to the slaves in Columbia, a ministry that would occupy the remainder of his life.



About 10,000 enslaved Africans arrived in Cartagena each year. Fr. Alonso’s work took him to the plantations where the slaves were placed where he would meet with them and minister to them after they had been sold. Peter saw that the enslaved were in their most dismal state when they were still in the ships. The enslaved endured miserable conditions on their journey and the slave holds of the ships were often places of disease, pestilence, and hunger. Peter would beg for food on the streets of Cartagena, board the ships, and tend to the needs of the enslaved before they had even left the ship, feeding the hungry, doctoring the sick, baptizing the dying, and ministering to each of his brothers and sisters in Christ. He would not leave until he had cared for each individual and would baptize as many as possible before they even left the ship so that he could encourage slave owners to give humane treatment to fellow Christians.

Between the arrival of ships, Peter spent much time in the city streets, preaching to the rich, poor, sick, and incarcerated. Throughout his ministry the treatment of the enslaved improved, much to the chagrin of the city magistrates who merely saw Peter as a nuisance. Peter also took time to visit all those whom he had baptized on their plantations and encourage them in their faith. During these visits he would not stay with the plantation owners as was the custom, but he would stay in the slave quarters.

In 1651, Peter was sickened by the plague. During the last three years of his life, Peter was too ill to leave his room. The ex-slave who was hired to care for him treated him cruelly, not feeding him many days, and never bathing him. Peter never complained, convinced that he deserved this treatment.

In 1654 Peter was anointed with the oil of the Sacrament of the Sick. At the time of his death Cartegenians crowded into his room to see him for the last time and took everything but his bedclothes as relics and mementos. Even the magistrates honored Peter at the time of his death by ordering and paying for a costly state funeral.

“We must speak to them with our hands before we speak to them with our lips.” – Peter Claver, SJ

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Ignatius was convinced that God can speak to us as surely through our imagination as through our thoughts and memories. In the Ignatian tradition, praying with the imagination is called contemplation. In the Exercises, contemplation is a very active way of praying that engages the mind and heart and stirs up thoughts and emotions. (Note that in other spiritual traditions, *contemplation* has quite a different meaning: it refers to a way of praying that frees the mind of all thoughts and images.)

Ignatian contemplation is suited especially for the Gospels. In the Second Week of the Exercises, we accompany Jesus through his life by imagining scenes from the Gospel stories. Let the events of Jesus' life be present to you right now. Visualize the event as if you were making a movie. Pay attention to the details: sights, sounds, tastes, smells, and feelings of the event. Lose yourself in the story; don't worry if your imagination is running too wild. At some point, place yourself in the scene.

Contemplating a Gospel scene is not simply remembering it or going back in time. Through the act of contemplation, the Holy Spirit makes present a mystery of Jesus' life in a way that is meaningful for you now. Use your imagination to dig deeper into the story so that God may communicate with you in a personal, evocative way.

We might initially worry about going beyond the text of the Gospel. If you have offered your time of prayer to God, then begin by trusting that God is communicating with you. If you wonder if your imagination is going "too far," then do some discernment with how you are praying. Where did your imagining lead you: Closer to God or farther away? Is your imagining bringing you consolation or desolation?

Some people find imaginative prayer difficult. They may not be able to picture the scene easily, yet they may have some intuition or gut reaction to the story. Or they may hear or feel the story more than visualize it. In a spirit of generosity, pray as you are able; don't try to force it. Rest assured that God will speak to you, whether through your memory, understanding, intellect, emotions, or imagination.

Excerpt from "*The Ignatian Adventure*" by Kevin O'Brien, SJ.

If you would like to try that exercise with a Gospel story from this time in the church year, try these passages: Matthew 2:1-12 (Epiphany) or Mark 1:7-11 (Jesus' Baptism)

If you would like to learn more about imaginative prayer, try these websites: godinallthings.com or ignatianspirituality.com

Reading Assignment: Chapters 11,19, and 42