

Francis D. Alvarez
Boston College School of Theology and Ministry
fralvare@bc.edu
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Ignatian Contemplation in the Classroom: Fostering Imagination in Scripture Study

Abstract: The practice of Ignatian contemplation, a method of praying suggested in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, can ignite the imagination in Scripture study. By involving the bodily senses and emotions, Ignatian contemplation helps one enter and be immersed in a Bible scene. More than just a technique that can lead to an imaginative wrestling with texts, Ignatian contemplation seeks to facilitate an encounter with God. But to integrate Ignatian contemplation in teaching the Bible, one needs a more dynamic understanding of the essence of Scripture, an appreciation of ritual, and an expanded view of Scripture study that, while rooted in historical-critical methods, also goes beyond them.

When the Bible as taught in the classroom becomes nothing more than a valley of dry bones, what can breathe life into it again? The key I present in this essay is imagination.

Paul Ricoeur, writing on the Bible and imagination, asks:

Is not the imagination, by common consent, a faculty of free invention, therefore something not governed by rules, something wild and untamed? What is more, is it not condemned to wandering about the internal spaces of what we conventionally call the mental kingdom, and does it not therefore lack any referential import, being entirely disconnected from what is really real? As for the Bible, is it not a closed book, one whose meaning is fixed forever and therefore the enemy of any radically original creation of meaning? Does it not claim to give rise to an existential and ontological commitment, one hostile to any imaginative drifting from here to there?¹

In answer to these questions, Ricoeur defines imagination first “as a rule-governed form of invention or, in other terms, as a norm-governed productivity” and secondly “as the power of redescribing reality.”² As for the Bible, Ricoeur asserts that reading is “a dynamic activity that is not confined to repeating significations fixed forever,” and that reading a text such as Scripture involves “a creative operation unceasingly employed in decontextualizing its meaning and recontextualizing it in today’s *Sitz-im-Leben*.”³

¹Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the Sacred: Religion, Narrative, and Imagination*, ed. Mark I. Wallace (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 144.

²Ibid.

³Ibid., 145.

In the next pages, I present Ignatian contemplation as a way of praying with our imagination that, far from just fantasizing, is a norm-governed productivity, an engagement with Scripture that redescribes reality, and a dynamic activity that enables the Bible to speak to us today. I first describe how Jesuit novices are prepared for and then guided through the experience of contemplation during the thirty-day retreat structured by St. Ignatius of Loyola. I then propose a way to incorporate elements of this process into classroom teaching.

Contemplation in the *Spiritual Exercises* of Ignatius

Contrasted with more discursive styles of reflection that mainly involve thinking through things, contemplation – as it is practiced in the *Spiritual Exercises* (SpEx) of Ignatius of Loyola – is more imaginative and leads the pray-er to immerse himself or herself in a scene from the Bible. As a method, contemplation consists in entering faith memories recorded in Scripture in such a way as to experience oneself as present in biblical episodes. God, Jesus, and other characters are met as real persons “face to face.” How can using the imagination in this way already be considered prayer and not just an exercise of fantasy? As Richard Kearney has written, imagination “encounters limits to its own free play when confronted with the irreducible otherness of the other.”⁴ Essential to an imaginative contemplation of Scripture is the belief that the Bible is the Word of God. Imagination is still answerable and responsible to the other; in Ignatian contemplation, this other is God. In contemplating Scripture, a believer in honest search of the Divine encounters God who continues to reach out to us today in our lives, drawing us into union with Godself, and sharing God’s vision and desires for the world with us.⁵

How are Jesuit novices prepared for and guided through the *Spiritual Exercises*?

Remote Preparation

Preparation for a thirty-day retreat includes workshops on the what, why, and how of prayer. But aside from these, there are also modules on the historical-critical aspects of the Bible, revelation, Christology, and other branches of theology. For Ignatius, intellectual reflection and rational thinking are not foreign to spiritual experience. Official Catholic teaching also promotes the use of historical-critical methods in reading and praying with Scripture. Scripture is God’s words through human words, and so we must study these human words with all our human faculties.

Filipino biblical scholar and auxiliary bishop Pablo David, in a course on the role of imagination in biblical interpretation, couches imaginative reading in terms of interpolative reading: Interpolation is “connecting the dots” and finding upward, downward, or sideward trends. But before you can connect the dots, the dots must first be found and taken seriously.⁶ These “dots,” in Ricoeur’s terms, are the norms or rules that govern the imagination. Historical-critical methods help us see more clearly some of the dots in the text. These dots can also serve

⁴Richard Kearney, *Poetics of Modernity: Toward a Hermeneutic Imagination* (New Jersey: Humanity Books, 1995), 101.

⁵Michael Ivens, *Understanding the Spiritual Exercises: Text and Commentary; A Handbook for Retreat Directors*, Iñigo Texts Series, vol. 4 (Leominster: Gracewing, 1998), 90.

⁶Minerva Generalao, “Viewing Last Supper Through Imagination,” *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, April 2, 2015, <http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/682948/viewing-last-supper-through-imagination> (accessed April 20, 2015).

to make our imagination more vivid. For example, archaeological studies of the Jerusalem temple can give us a better picture of Jesus turning over the tables of the money changers and driving out those selling animals for sacrifice. But historical-critical dots are not the only dots we need to connect. As Scripture scholar Luke Timothy Johnson urges, we cannot just be preoccupied with the world that produced the Bible. We must enter the world that the Bible produces.⁷ And this world that Scripture invites us to enter includes us.

Part of the remote preparation for the SpEx are psycho-spiritual sessions to help the novices process possible issues involving family and relationships, sexuality, and personal vocation. We cannot deny that a reader's context and preconceptions affect his or her interpretation. The subjective element in reading anything cannot be taken away – nor should we try to, especially in reading Scripture. But we must always seek to be more humbly aware of where we are coming from and what our assumptions may be. Many times, too, it is precisely in the act of wrestling with a text that these assumptions come to light. Psycho-spiritual realities are part of the dots which govern our imagination, dots which we need to connect.

Immediate Preparation

During the thirty-day retreat, each Jesuit novice is assigned a spiritual director who lays out prayer points and Scriptural texts he should consider. Once the Bible texts are given, the novice is expected to familiarize himself with the passage. The texts themselves and their actual contents should be the first “dots” or “rules” that must be considered by the imagination.

Ignatius also suggests that retreatants, immediately before prayer, mark the beginning of the session with a mental act and bodily ritual: “A step or two before the place where I have to contemplate or meditate, I will stand for the space of an Our Father and, with my mind raised up, consider how God our Lord is looking at me... I will then make a genuflection or some other act of humility” (SpEx 75).

The Experience of Contemplation

Ignatian contemplation begins with a “composition of place.” An example from the contemplation of the Nativity of Christ: “Here this will be to see with the eyes of the imagination the road from Nazareth to Bethlehem, considering the length and the breadth of it, whether it is a flat road or goes through valleys or over hills...” (SpEx 112). In other contemplations, aside from seeing the persons (SpEx 106), Ignatius encourages the retreatant to listen to what the characters in the episode are saying and how they talk (SpEx 107), and to be immersed in the scene by imagining the smells and tastes (SpEx 124) and what sensations may be brought to touch (SpEx 125). One of the purposes of imagining what the body may sense is to stir up the emotions. In Ignatian contemplation, the pray-er must use not only his or her understanding but must also wrestle with emotions, “inner feeling,” and “affections” (SpEx 2-3). For example, in contemplating Jesus' prayer and agony after the Last Supper, after composing the place and seeing with the eyes of the imagination Jesus sweating blood (Luke 22:39-44), the exercitant is directed to ask for the grace of “grief with Christ in grief, to be broken with Christ broken, for tears and interior suffering on account of the great suffering that Christ endured for me” (SpEx 203).

⁷Luke Timothy Johnson, “Imagining the World Scripture Imagines,” *Modern Theology* 14, no. 2 (April 1, 1998): 165.

Neuroscience has shown that by imagining bodily expressions of emotions (e.g., facial expressions, posture, and vocal intonations – and even sweating blood), we are able to comprehend the emotions of others. These emotions do not remain in the abstract but are also embodied or felt in the body of the one imagining. These embodied emotions then produce emotional states. In other words, by imagining the physical signs of the emotions of others, our bodies are able to feel what they are feeling, and we come closer to empathizing with others. Moreover, these emotions mediate cognitive responses involved in recognition or identification, evaluation, and memory.⁸ The body has a way of “knowing,” and emotions, too, are a way of “knowing” which affects what the mind comes to know.

Physical senses and feelings are effective ways to trigger the imaginative process, but they also serve a greater purpose. Knowing through our bodies and knowing through our emotions (two ways of knowing which cannot easily or clearly be separated and even distinguished) are not supposed to end only in the acquisition of new thoughts and ideas or sentimentalism. The point of these bodily and emotional preludes is to facilitate an encounter with God.

Philip Sheldrake shares the contemplation experience of one retreatant:⁹

She was contemplating the incident of Peter walking on the water (Matthew 14:22-33)... [A]s she had sailed when she was younger... [s]he was familiar with the frustration and fear of fighting against a strong wind and current. This helped her to “get inside” the scene. (Here we see how bodily memories can help the imagination.) Jesus was there, and she, like Peter, had a strong desire to join him on the water. However, she also felt unable to get out of the boat. Though she tried, she could not imagine herself stepping out of the boat and so the prayer, according to her, “went wrong at that point.” Why did she feel that the contemplation had broken down? Up until then, she could identify with the actual events in the Gospel, but when she could not get out of the boat, the story took an unexpected turn. She said to Jesus, “I cannot get out of this boat.” She felt Jesus asking her why, and she had to admit that I was scared, “I can sail, but I can’t swim very well.” She then felt that Jesus was asking her whether she thought that he would make her do something beyond her capacity. Her answer: “Yes, you would... you often have.” This experience led the person to spend the remainder of the prayer sitting and talking to Christ about the fact that she did not really trust him because she did not know him well enough.

It would help us to understand contemplation better by noting a few observations. Sheldrake points out that retreatant was not just a spectator in the story; she was fully involved. Though she identified with Peter, the experience was not just a retelling of Peter’s story but an unfolding of her own, which included her present context and all of her concerns – conscious and unconscious. While bodily sensations were strong in the beginning, they gradually faded. These can help one enter into contemplation, but they are not the point of the prayer. These are also only one aspect of the imagination. The retreatant did not just hear Jesus speaking to her. She

⁸See Paula M. Niedenthal, Lawrence W. Barsalou, François Ric, and Silvia Krauth-Gruber, “Embodiment in the Acquisition and Use of Emotion Knowledge,” in *Emotion and Consciousness*, ed. Lisa Feldman Barrett, Paula M. Niedenthal, and Piotr Winkielman (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), 21-44.

⁹Philip Sheldrake, “Imagination and Prayer,” *The Way* 24, no. 2 (April 1984), 92.

“felt” Jesus asking her things and conversing with her. This is the purpose of imaginative contemplation: an encounter with the Lord that engages our deepest realities.¹⁰

Sheldrake asks if the prayer went wrong because it did not follow the text of the Gospel. The experience was still set in the general parameters of the passage, but from the “dots” and “rules” of the text, there was a shift to more relevant “dots” and “rules” – the retreatant’s most pressing needs, which she may also not have been aware of or at least not been able to articulate until that time. Sheldrake writes, “Imaginative contemplation, when it works, takes on a life of its own – and [this] life is that of the person praying.”¹¹ Returning to Kearney’s thoughts on imagination, the irreducible and undeniable other that we encounter in contemplation is also ourselves and our experiences of the world.

Processing the Experience

“After finishing the exercise, I will either sit down or walk around for a quarter of an hour while I see how things have gone for me during the contemplation...” (SpEx 77). This is when the exercitant can do some journaling about the contemplation experience and interpret it. This “review of prayer” is a transitional space of processing which would have been inappropriate during the prayer itself.¹² During prayer, the exercitant should try to lose himself or herself in the experience and not yet be concerned about its meaning or interpretation, which is essential to the experience but which must be dealt with only subsequently.

Interpretation post-prayer is also a work of the imagination. Interpretation is a way of seeing things that seeks to grasp them and make meaning out of them. And making meanings is one step towards what Ricoeur speaks of as redescribing reality. For example, a tragic accident involving the loss of limbs and mobility can be interpreted as the end of someone’s life. But later on, that same person can interpret his or her loss as the impetus to discovering new things about himself or herself and the beginning a new life. The undeniable fact of the accident is given new meaning, and with this new meaning, reality is redescribed.

There are good and there are better interpretations. For better interpretations, we must be open to interpretations and input coming from others. The retreat director, in this case, must clarify Christian tradition and help the retreatant discern the meaning of his prayer experience.

Part of the processing of the entire thirty-day retreat are multiple sessions at the end of the *Exercises* for the novices to share their most important contemplations or those that they still have to figure out. These become opportunities for the Jesuits to hear other interpretations of similar experiences and to challenge or further deepen their own.

How can we integrate Ignatian contemplation in classroom teaching?

What may have been unexpected in the preparation for the *Exercises* – the turn to historical-critical methods – is, of course, very much expected in and should be the bulk of the classroom experience of Scripture study. What I propose to include in classroom teaching are the elements of imaginative prayer, encounter, and ritual.

¹⁰Ibid., 92-93.

¹¹Ibid., 93.

¹²Ivens, 68.

Before each class, students should be assigned a passage (the shorter the better) that will be discussed during that session. They are then expected to familiarize themselves with it and its context and perhaps read one commentary about it. At the start of each meeting, the teacher can begin with a simple ritual similar to what Ignatius suggests above to briefly consider God looking at the class. It can be as simple as the teacher saying, “Let us open our Bibles and prepare to listen to God,” and then pausing for a few moments with heads bowed. This ritual already begins and emphasizes the encounter.

A student can then be asked to read the passage slowly. If, for example, the class is on the passion of Jesus, the passage can be John 18:15-18, the first time Peter denies Jesus. After a few moments of silence, the teacher can ask the students to focus on one part of the passage that is open to bodily sensations. It would be good if this part of the passage can be connected to an important point in the discussion that day. The teacher can ask the students to engage their bodily senses as they put themselves in the scene. In our sample passage, this can be the charcoal fire that Peter stood close to in order to warm himself. Let this detail be the entry point to the contemplation. The students can then be asked to imagine themselves in the scene. After a few minutes, the teacher can end the short contemplation by asking the students, “What feelings have been aroused in you during this short prayer experience?” An important question follow-up question is, “What do you think God is communicating to you through these feelings and through what you just imagined?”

“What do you feel?” is a question rarely asked in the academic study of Scripture, and this may be a reason for dryness in reading the Bible. Adam Zeman, a cognitive neurologist from the University of Exeter Medical School, used state-of-the-art functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) technology to map the way the brain responds to poetry and prose. He scanned and compared the brains of volunteers while they read two types of material: literal prose such as an extract from a heating installation manual, and more poetic writings such as evocative passages from novels and sonnets. He found that more emotionally charged texts aroused areas on the right side of the brain which had previously been shown to give rise to the sensation of having “shivers down the spine.” This reaction was also seen in volunteers listening and being moved emotionally by music.¹³

If poetry and music are processed in what is usually the non-dominant right side of the brain, while materials like heating insulation manuals are processed by the dominant and analytical left side,¹⁴ does this mean that dryness in reading biblical texts comes from analyzing them too much and depending on just the left side of our brains? How can we go beyond treating Scripture like a heating insulation manual? An attention to emotions may help us involve the right side of the brain. We must remind ourselves again though that the point here is not just to be moved to feel but to dispose ourselves more to an encounter.

After their individual experiences of contemplation, the students can be asked to share in small groups what happened in their prayer. Sharing not only gives students the opportunity to vocalize and understand for themselves their experiences but also to learn from others.

¹³Rick Nauert, “Poetry: Music to the Mind,” PsychCentral, October 10, 2013, <http://psychcentral.com/news/2013/10/10/poetry-music-to-the-mind/60555.html> (accessed March 15, 2015).

¹⁴See Solomon Snyder, “Seeking God in the Brain – Efforts to Localize Higher Brain Function,” *New England Journal of Medicine* 358, no. 1 (January 2008): 6-7.

As the class proceeds, the teacher, in his or her lecture, must give space for themes that come up in the students' prayers. Ignatian contemplation cannot just be an added activity but must affect the way the class is taught and what is discussed. Allowing space for what happened in prayer to enter class discussion emphasizes how Scripture is able to address our lives today.

To integrate Ignatian contemplation in the classroom is to raise Scripture study to a communal practice. Social theorist Pierre Bourdieu invokes the notion of *habitus* in making sense of the power of communal practices. *Habitus* is a system of “durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them.”¹⁵ *Habitus* is internalized as “second nature,” functions as “accumulated capital,” and is akin to a “practical sense,” know-how, and an acquired and embodied rhythm.¹⁶ Scripture study should not just be about dispensing information but inculcating a *habitus* of encountering God in praying with the Bible and encountering God in the prayer of others.

There is a trend in Scripture study that has sometimes led to an “over-historicization” of the Bible: finding the original text, the original context, and the original intention of the author. In this obsession with “originals” what is many times left out is a consideration of the original way of engaging Scripture. If we take the general lack of literacy and the great expense of producing texts into account, it is very easy to imagine communities gathered together around one manuscript being read out loud by one member. There are many clues in Scripture that tell us these texts were read in worship (open the Psalter and this becomes clear) – in prayer settings. Scripture was originally experienced in communal prayer. Perhaps it is time to retrieve this type of communal practice in the study of the Bible.

[Note: Space constraints have not allowed me to go more deeply into areas which will hopefully be discussed in my presentation: What are the advantages and disadvantages of Ignatian contemplation? What is needed from the students to integrate Ignatian contemplation in the classroom? How will the teacher's role change when Ignatian contemplation is practiced in class? What are the underlying assumptions about Scripture in Ignatian contemplation?]

¹⁵Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1990), 53.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 56, 66.

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