

SF 1.7 Practicum – Contemplating God in Scripture

Imago Christi – Biblical Literacy is how we form the mind of Christ within us as His disciples. The study of Scripture is the only authoritative revelation humanity has for discovering and exploring God and the Spiritual life He has called us into as His sons and daughters... a people of God.

A) A Guide for Contemplating God in Scripture (Special Revelation)

Thomas Merton described contemplation as *“a long loving look at the real.”* Prayer has been described as *“any and all of our various ways of entering into direct communion with God.”* Contemplative prayer practices seek to find ways that help us commune with God by deeply and lovingly entering into God’s real presence and there hear what God is speaking into our hearts and lives. In particular, contemplative prayer attempts to shift us more toward the listening side of the conversation than the speaking side – giving the Spirit space to be heard. The result of contemplative prayer goes beyond mere comprehension.

The prayer itself is an experience, very real and memorable as any other actual event. It refreshes our thoughts and deepens our love for Christ. Commonly, we carry away from it the memory of a gesture or a vivid scene for a long time. We also come away from contemplation with an idea or a thought to jot down and dwell upon later, though it may not do justice in summarizing our total experience. While the experience of such prayer may be very satisfying in and of itself, the real fruit of all prayer is God’s continual spiritual transformation of our life as evidenced in greater love, purity and compassion. Such is the nature of worshiping God in prayer.

There are many forms of contemplative prayer, including many that use Scripture to pray. If you spend more than a few minutes paying attention to any passage in the Bible, you will be praying. Why? Because you will be listening to words that God wanted you to hear... words guaranteed by His Spirit... words that transform us and makes us his own.

Contemplative prayer seeks to engage us relationally and emotively with God. Meditation is its counterpart that seeks to engage us mentally and cognitively with God. Both involve deliberately pressing deeper into God, to enjoy Him and be transformed by Him. Meditative prayer seeks to understand what God has revealed in Scripture and how it speaks into my life and into my world. The two are very similar, but differ by the focus.

The most natural way to pray with Scripture is to read it attentively and devoutly. In Saint Ignatius’ Spiritual Exercises, this approach is distinguished as *“Contemplating the Scriptures,”* and is one of the possible means of praying with Scripture. It serves as a major component in

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an attempt to find God in all things. It involves employing our imagination in order to know our Creator, Lord and Friend more intimately. Our imagination is one important faculty through which God can gift us with prayer, as we learn to love God with (and through) all our heart, mind, soul, and strength (all the faculties of our whole person).

Employing the imagination is a wonderful means to make Scripture real. Sometimes when a friend tells you about being on a beach in Hawaii, if you can almost feel the experience described – the refreshing trade winds and smell the tropical fragrances. Your mind conjures up wonderful imaginings of what it must have been like. You can actually become absorbed in his story as you begin to see, hear, smell and even taste the sensations described. What your friend has done is help you ‘contemplate’ their experience. We do precisely this every time we read a story or a novel; we let ourselves enter into another world and we are there vicariously experiencing the tale. For example, on the road to Emmaus, we imagine our selves walking along that dusty dirt path. We feel the heat of the Middle East sun, hear the disillusionment of the disciples, and converse with the risen but veiled Christ. We enter into the story and become one of the travelers inviting Jesus to remain with us for the night as the day draws to a close. We share a meal and break bread together and recall how our “hearts burned within as he talked to us along the way.” Then, He is revealed to you. Such is the power of story.

Contemplation is a wonderful ‘spiritual exercise’ because all things become present in God, who is not limited by time. So, when we turn to God and remember events in the life of Jesus or other biblical characters, these events and we are both present in God in His eternal ‘Now.’ The event is in the past to you, but all things are present in God, so in Him you enter it as if you are now there.

The manner of contemplating involves some planning and effort, but if we allow our imagination freedom we can gain wonderful experiences with God. By actively engaging our five senses in listening with an open heart and spirit, we create a quiet place for the Spirit to speak (or not!) whatever word is for us at this moment.

B) Exercise: Contemplating Scripture

This is a method for contemplation offered by St. Ignatius where you can healthily employ your imagination for the sake of coming to know, love and follow Jesus better.

1. In prayer I consciously *I come into God’s presence and feel his loving gaze and then I offer myself to him. I say, “Father, here am I... I receive you now.”*

SF 1.7 Practicum – Contemplating God in Scripture

2. *I select the text that is on my mind or heart that captures a part of sacred history.*
3. *Then, I compose myself with the desire to enter into the story and into the scene of the text I am going to contemplate or in the place the text describes. I drink in the text.*
4. *Further, I ask God for what I want: I want to know Christ intimately, friend to friend. I want to share his company. I want to go where he goes and do what he does. I want to see things through His eyes. I desire revelation [truth] and illumination [insight] that will draw me closer to You.*
5. *Finally, I enter into the event. This can be done in several ways from a direct participant to an active observer or a passive observer. In each instance there is a different view of what is transpiring.*
6. *I notice the people themselves, keenly, lovingly. I listen to what they say. Then, I watch how they are acting. I can imagine their expressions... some of the things the text cannot reveal directly.*
7. *I get involved in the scene at whatever point I feel drawn into it. I act in it, I am a part of the event – (e.g. Luke 24:13ff - discussing the disappointments, asking the questions, breaking the bread.)*
8. *I go along with one of the persons in the story and we talk and listen to one another's experience.*

Whichever way is chosen from the above, we try to keep ourselves engaged with our imagination. It can lead us to a deeper intimacy with Jesus for we have the assurance that the Holy Spirit is there to guide us along the way as we enter into sacred Scripture.

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