

Ignatius, the Wiseman: Reflection #2

An ongoing series exploring how Ignatius the Pilgrim discerned the spirits in his quest for Christ.

Christ can be found using prayerful imagination

...It is much better that the Creator and Lord in person communicate Himself to the devout soul in quest of the divine will, that He inflame it with His love and praise.

(Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, Annotation XV)

Neither the Wisemen nor Ignatius would have set out to find Christ had they not believed that Christ could be found. Often in my preaching I'll say something like "In my prayer this week, Christ told me...." Listeners sometimes approach me afterward lamenting, "I wish Christ would speak to me that way." They get discouraged and stop listening for Christ, believing that it simply won't work for them. They presume that Christ speaks in a clear otherworldly voice. But that's not how it works. When he speaks to me, Christ does so through my own imagination. Christ's voice inside my head is my own! Sometimes when I say that Christ said such and such to me, a cynic responds, "Nah, that's just your imagination," to which I respond, "Of course it's my imagination! How do you think Christ communicates?" God created my imagination, so why would he not employ it?

It works something like this:

- I sit in my favorite prayer chair with a cup of coffee. I slowly quiet myself and get a sense of Christ's presence in the room and inside me. It feels like a warmth, a comfort, a presence of love.
- I begin to speak to him (silently, in my head) about what's on my mind and heart. I might express some emotion, nagging problem, or lingering question. I do this in a quiet, subtle way, not disturbing the peace I feel—not removing my attention to his presence.
- I don't demand a response from Christ but I remain attentive in case he chooses to do so. Otherwise, I peacefully, prayerfully, quietly turn over the emotion, problem or question. I just let it float in the room. Sometimes, I'll tweak it a little—rephrase it to better articulate it. Sometimes I'll scribble a word, phrase or sentence in my spiritual journal.
- If I feel inspired to do so, I'll imagine how Christ might be responding to me. In my head, I say, "God, I imagine you saying ____ to me. Is that right? Is that what you're trying to tell me?" If I sense a deeper peace, then I go with the presumption that I might be right. I might scribble this answer from my imagination into my spiritual journal. I let God's answer float in the room a while.

I might tweak it a bit to better articulate what I imagine God might be trying to say to me.

- If the thing I'm talking with God about is momentous and important to me, I might return to it day after day in my prayer, all the while tweaking my words to God and God's words to me.

That's it! It's as simple as that! Many people do not hear God's voice because they reject their own imagination, which is the very instrument through which God wants to communicate. Now, of course, I could indeed be getting God's words wrong. And this is where Ignatius's Discernment of Spirits comes into play. I will need to learn to discern which interior spirits are moving me at any given moment. Much more on that later! But for now, know that I never let the fear of being wrong about God's words to me keep me from imagining his words to me. After all, Ignatius the Wiseman presumed that Christ wanted to be found—that he wanted to “communicate himself in person” to me.

Join the Quest!

Try it yourself: take my bulleted list above and use it as a checklist in your next prayer time. If you're unaccustomed to this type of prayer, be patient with yourself. It might take some days or weeks before it starts to kick in. But trust that Christ wants to be found by you and so it is destined to work!

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