

How Do We Pray With Our Imagination?

We meet new friends and we want to get to know them better. How do we do it? We share our stories. We tell them about our childhood, how we met our spouse or how our great-grandparents moved here.

We live in a rational, left brain world with global technology at our fingertips. Yet as human beings, our soul is still fired by color and imagination. Our minds are storehouses of images and memories and through them God works in our hearts. Praying with our imaginations can create a deeper and more personal intimacy with Jesus, Mary, the disciples and others written about in scripture. We can take the familiar stories we know and let them flow through our own imagination and see where the Lord guides it.

Using the imagination in prayer has been a treasured tradition in prayer for centuries. It prompted St. Francis of Assisi to encourage people to create nativity scenes at Christmas, to imagine the Holy Family as people like we are. Four hundred years later, St. Ignatius of Loyola used imaginative prayer as a key part of his life-transforming Spiritual Exercises.

How do we start? First we get settled in a comfortable chair and in a quiet place where we won't be distracted. Our first gesture might be to open our hands on our lap, and to ask God to open our hearts and imaginations.

Then pick a story out of scripture. Read through it once slowly and put it down. Now we begin to imagine the scene as if we are standing right there. What is around me? Who else is there? What do I hear in the scene? If I am in a house, what noises are in the house or in the street outside? What are the smells I can pick up?

Now we begin to imagine the scene we read about. Who is in it? What conversation takes place? What is the mood – tense? joyful? confused? angry?

Feel free to paint this picture in any way your imagination takes you. If we worry about historical accuracy, it can be a distraction that takes us away from prayer. This isn't scripture – this is letting God take our imaginations and reveal to us something of the intimate life of Jesus or others. If, in our prayer, Mary pulls the toddler Jesus onto her lap to tie his shoes or zip his coat, we can let it happen that way. We don't want to fret about the historically accurate kinds of food served at a dinner or what kind of carpenter tools Joseph might have really had in his workshop. Here is an experience of prayer that lets our imaginations free themselves from anything that limits them. This is God revealing himself to us.

It helps if we imagine Jesus and his disciples as the real people they were who walked the earth. St. Ignatius imagined that the first person Jesus appeared to after the Resurrection was his mother and he encourages us to picture Jesus appearing at home to Mary, watching the joy and emotion in the scene.