

Praying Like the Saints: Meditating With Scripture

If God loves anything, he loves growth. He has created all living things with an inherent capacity for expansion. Puppies grow into their paws, seedlings transform into cheerful daisies, and students mature into saints and scholars. All too often, we assume that prayer is somehow different. Prayer is perceived as a mystical gift that sweeps the chosen few into bouts of inexplicable ecstasy; the Lord could not possibly intend to speak to the “average” Christian.

The saints, however, knew this was not true. Many have trod the path before us and set down concrete principles that can teach us how to pray. Prayer, like all worthwhile endeavors, is a skill you can learn through study, imitation, and mentorship.

This particular treatise will focus specifically on praying with scripture. Both Lectio Divina and Ignatian imaginative prayer are ancient meditation methods. Both are meant to lead one into the “wordless gaze” of contemplation, a place of unity and love in Our Lord’s presence. The primary difference between these two methods lies in their focus: Lectio Divina emphasizes the *words of scripture*, whereas Ignatian imaginative prayer focuses on *imagery*. Auditory learners may find Lectio Divina more natural, but others may prefer Ignatian imaginative prayer. Finally, it’s also worth noting that some scripture passages will lend themselves better to one of these methods.

Each method employs a specific structure that is designed to engage your heart and mind. However, the ultimate goal is always contemplation. If you feel the Holy Spirit inviting you to pause, to rest, to bask in the Lord’s presence – stop following the prescribed steps and just be with Our Lord. You have already reached the goal!

Regardless of the method you choose, make sure you begin your meditation by asking for a specific grace. You might ask for the grace to forgive someone, grow in a particular virtue, heal from a profound psychological wound, discern the best direction for your life, or surrender to the Lord’s will.

While God’s Word was written in a historical time and place, the Lord uses it to transcend the boundaries of time and speak in the here and now. The Lord is waiting to speak to your heart; you have only to learn to listen.

Lectio Divina

Lectio Divina is Latin for “Divine Reading” and was developed by St. Benedict of Nursia. This method follows four clear steps:

1. *Lectio* – Reading

Read the passage slowly. If possible, read it out loud. You may even want to read the passage twice.

2. *Meditatio* – Meditation

Typically, a word or phrase will stand out to you. Repeat this phrase in your mind, mulling it over. You will be distracted by something – the ticking of a clock, your dog’s barking, a chore you forgot – this is normal! Don’t beat yourself up, but gently draw your attention back to the meditation by continuing to repeat your chosen word or phrase.

3. *Oratio* – Prayer

At this point, it can be useful to ask the Lord questions and listen for his answers. You may want to ask:

- a. Why did you bring me to this passage? What do you have for me to learn?
- b. What does this word truly mean? How has my understanding of this word been distorted?
- c. What do you want to heal? How do I need to repent?

4. *Contemplatio* – Contemplation

Contemplation is traditionally seen as an unearned gift; this is a moment in which we experience the Lord’s loving gaze upon us, and we gaze upon him in return. Don’t fret if you don’t reach contemplation. Like all things, prayer is a skill, and we learn over time how to be receptive to the Lord’s presence.

If you have not yet finished the time set aside for prayer but feel you have exhausted the graces from one word or phrase, you can simply go back to the beginning and start again with a different word or phrase. The more frequently you practice Lectio Divina, the more these steps will overlap and blend into each other.

Ignatian Imaginative Prayer

Like Lectio Divina, the goal of Ignatian Imaginative Prayer is contemplation. Also called Ignatian Contemplation, this method was developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola and uses your

imagination to bring the scriptures to life. The method therefore works best with passages that incorporate a narrative structure or strong imagery. The basic steps are as follows:

1. Read the passage slowly.
2. Composition of Place: Use your imagination to place yourself in the scene. Engage all of your senses. What do you see, feel, hear, taste, or smell? Are you a particular individual in the passage? Are you an anonymous observer? Fully immerse yourself into the story.
3. Scene Development: Watch the scene unfold in your mind. If there is an image that fills you with wonder, love, or a desire to worship, stay with that image and ask the Lord to help you understand what he is seeking to communicate. The Lord may even “take over” your imagination and move the image in surprising directions – let Him do so!

Some Final Tips

If possible, end your prayer time by journaling about your experience. What grace did you ask for? What questions did you bring to the Lord, and did you receive any answers? Did you feel his presence? Did he direct your prayer in surprising ways?

Even after we have grown in prayer, the Lord sometimes remains quiet. Often, he is silent. He knows that the true lover pursues his beloved amid trial, and so he waits to see if we will pursue him even without the gift of his felt presence. Other times we fail to enter into contemplation because we are tired or distracted, in which case it is good to remind ourselves to take care of our physical health or consider choosing a different time or place for prayer. Finally, our attachment to pride, sin, distrust, and unforgiveness can impede our ability to be receptive to the Lord’s voice; if we sense this is the case, we should ask the Lord to give us the grace of repentance.

Keep in mind that sometimes your prayer will be dry, but that does not mean it was not worthwhile. Often the Lord answers my requests days later. Persevere in prayer, and you will not be disappointed.

“And you will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.”
(Jeremiah 29:13)