

Saint Ignatius Loyola is best known as the founder of the Jesuits. But, in many ways, his greatest gift to the Church is his method of prayerful meditation.

Íñigo Oñaz López de Loyola was born in 1491 in what we today call the Basque region of Northern Spain. His name was later Latinised as 'Ignatius.' He was a soldier and was injured at the Battle of Pamplona in 1521 and forced to recuperate. He was a nobleman by birth and so, during his time of enforced sick-rest, he took to reading from the vast library he'd inherited. He read voraciously, but mainly about knightly exploits and spirituality. He was a romantic at heart and tried to imagine himself acting a part in the stories he read. He noticed a pattern: reading about knightly chivalry caused in him a sense of lethargy—even depression; but reading about Jesus and the saints inspired him deeply, which led to a sense of elation and peace.

Ignatius explored these findings and devised a series of exercises. We now call them 'the Spiritual Exercises.' At root, in each exercise readers take a straightforward scene, for example from the Gospels, and imagine themselves in it. They may take the role of one of the disciples or a by-stander at the crucifixion. They will then analyse their response to being in the presence of Jesus.

After imagining ourselves 'into' a Bible story in this way, Ignatius teaches us to analyse carefully our response(s) to the story. We must ask at each stage, 'How do I feel?' This use of the imagination is more a form of meditation followed by reflection than other, more traditional, forms of prayer. But it represents an enormously powerful way of understanding our spirituality.

There will always be an emotional response to meditations of this sort. Ignatius taught that emotional responses usually follow one of two

opposite extremes. Some aspects of a story or meditation will make us feel uplifted and inspired, making us want more. He called these aspects **consolations**. By contrast, other aspects of the same meditation may lead to boredom or even depression. They may inspire some sort of revulsion at our present ways of living. Ignatius called this latter kind **desolations**.

The idea that consolations are God-given is at the heart of Ignatian spirituality. In a sense, so are the spiritual desolations. Therefore, we are in reality following God if we follow a consolation. If we follow those aspects of a meditation that result in a sense of consolation, we are also following the promptings of the Holy Spirit. In effect, by following a consolation, we are seeking to grow in our Christian faith.

Similarly, desolations point to those aspects of our spiritual life that are not of God. We should avoid them if we want to grow spiritually.

The methods of Ignatian spirituality are easily learnt—absolutely everyone has at least some ability to imagine themselves into a story with Jesus. It is best to start with simple narrative stories from the Gospels. Later and with greater experience and confidence, it's possible to imagine ourselves in scenes with Jesus but in a contemporary situation. But a word of warning: it is wise to explore these exercises with an experienced Christian or, better, with a spiritual director.

## Ignatian Prayer

**Exercises** Read Mark 14:3–9 reverently as an act of devotion. It describes a woman anointing Jesus' feet with costly perfume. Then, try and imagine yourself inside the scene, either as a disciple or onlooker.

- Read it several times then ask, 'what do I feel?' and 'why?'
- Try to imagine yourself as one of the disciples. If you can, make the story as realistic as possible: involve all the senses, sight and hearing, smell and touch in the process. All the time, notice how you feel in the presence of Jesus.
- Many other narrative passages about Jesus are useful. Note that Jesus' parables may not be so useful as their meaning is metaphoric.

