



DAY 27: Conference

Ignatian Modes of Prayer

We have already spoken previously about several ways of praying proposed by Saint Ignatius. Let us review them briefly and add some others, in order to have the full range of all the richness that, in this respect, Saint Ignatius offers us in his small but immensely rich book of the Exercises.

1. MEDITATION, CONTEMPLATION, REPETITION, AND SUMMARY

When speaking of Ignatian prayer, one usually mentions nothing more than meditation, or the exercise of the three powers, as if this were the only form taught in the book of the *Exercises*, or at least the most common one and even the one peculiar to him. Here we have a case of human routine, as easy to acquire as it is difficult to abandon once it has come to be like a proverb in common speech. It is a sad thing to have always before one's eyes a little book like that of the *Exercises*, where things are said concisely but with the greatest possible clarity and simplicity, to read it and yet not become aware of what one is reading. For the truth is that, to cast off that prejudice, it is enough simply to know how to read.

Grave consequences have resulted from such a way of proceeding, common not only among the enemies of Saint Ignatius, but also among many of his friends. Ignatian prayer has been attacked as insufficient for the life of spiritual souls and even as if it were a hindrance or obstacle; the Saint himself is made to appear as an enemy of contemplation and altogether incapable of guiding a soul to the heights of the mystical state, insofar as this requires human direction.

Convinced that such confusion arises from not reading the book attentively and calmly, in order to dispel such erroneous interpretations we will enumerate the different ways of prayer that Saint Ignatius teaches us in the book of the *Exercises*, offering a brief commentary on them drawn from his own words. We will dwell more extensively on "The Three Modes of Prayer," since this is material not yet treated in this series.

1. MEDITATION

—we have already spoken about it—and practiced it—as well as contemplation; we revisit it only "briefly" in order to review all the ways in which we can pray according to the Ignatian method. By this name is understood the manner of praying by means of the use of the memory, understanding, and will. When we meditate, we are applying in an orderly and reflective way the aforesaid faculties to a suitable matter or subject and with a spiritual end.

This is a mode exceedingly well suited for penetrating abstract truths thoroughly: employing memory in an orderly and reflective way so that it recalls for us the words or facts that contain those truths; the understanding, so that it penetrates their meaning and their reasons; and the will, so that it stirs the affections that naturally arise from them and that are most fitting for our souls, according to the fruit we seek in that meditation.

A truth well fixed in the memory, thoroughly penetrated, deeply felt, and applied to what each person needs—this is what we all understand and hold to be the meditation of Saint Ignatius.

I copy a text from the Catechism of the Catholic Church on the subject:

2705- Meditation is, above all, a quest. The mind seeks to understand the why and the how of the Christian life in order to adhere to and respond to what the Lord is asking. [This requires] an attention that is difficult to sustain. One usually makes use of a book, and Christians are not lacking in such aids: Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospel; sacred images; the liturgical texts of the day or the season; writings of the spiritual Fathers; works of spirituality; etc.

2706- Meditating on what is read leads to making it one's own by confronting it with oneself.

2707 The methods of meditation are as diverse as spiritual masters themselves. A Christian should desire to meditate regularly; otherwise, he resembles the first three kinds of ground in the parable of the sower (cf. Mk 4:4–7, 15–19). But a method is only a guide; what matters is to advance, with the Holy Spirit, along the one path of prayer: Christ Jesus.

2708- Meditation engages thought, imagination, emotion, and desire. This mobilization is necessary in order to deepen convictions of faith, to arouse conversion of heart, and to strengthen the will to follow Christ. Christian prayer is applied preferentially to meditating on “the mysteries of Christ,” as in *lectio divina* or in the Rosary. This form of prayerful reflection is of great value, but Christian prayer must go further: toward knowledge of the love of the Lord Jesus, toward union with Him. Finally, Royo Marín, in his well-known and recommended *Theology of Christian Perfection*, defines it thus:

“Discursive meditation may be defined as the reasoned application of the mind to a supernatural truth in order to convince ourselves of it and to move us to love it and practice it with the help of grace.”

2. CONTEMPLATION

The exercises proposed by Saint Ignatius are, for the most part, contemplations. It would therefore be a manifest error to consider meditation as the sole system of Ignatian prayer.

Saint Ignatius was a great contemplative, and all those who become accustomed to praying according to the method of the Exercises will naturally acquire the habit of contemplation.

It should be understood that here we are speaking of acquired contemplation, that is, of the habit born of the exercise of the faculties, and not of infused contemplation, which is a gratuitous gift of the Holy Spirit.

Saint Ignatius makes the form of contemplation consist in three acts: “to see the persons” [106], “to hear what they are saying” [107], and “to observe what they are doing” [108], whose intuitive tendency is evident.

This, however, does not mean that contemplation has no share in discursive reasoning, especially in that reflection which invariably accompanies each of the points. Saint Ignatius, in the second and third points of the contemplation on the Nativity, says, “and by reflecting within myself, to draw some profit” [115].

The mind of Saint Ignatius could not be clearer. The Saint does not want our contemplation to be purely speculative, aesthetic, sentimental, or self-indulgent, but rather practical and endowed with spiritual force.

A few words about the matter of contemplation. It consists in visible things that can be contemplated in the manner of bodily realities; but it must be noted that contemplation does not end in them, and it would be a great error to think otherwise.

The interior senses open the way, just as the exterior senses are the natural path to the intellect; but once this step has been taken, and the soul has been warmed and illumined by sensible contemplation, it raises its spiritual gaze to higher things, independent of all matter.

3rd and 4th Methods: REPETITION AND SUMMARY

These two forms of prayer share the same fundamental concept, namely, that of using another hour of prayer on the same matters already meditated upon or contemplated. Nevertheless, each has its own proper characteristics, as souls given to contemplation understand very well.

Repetition, according to Saint Ignatius, consists in going back over the same points previously meditated upon, “noting and pausing on the points in which I have felt greater consolation or desolation, or greater spiritual feeling” [62]. In the summary, the “understanding, without wandering, diligently runs through the recollection of the things contemplated” [64]. We might say, then, that repetition is directed toward reinforcing feeling, allowing it to be satisfied at the sources already opened, or striking once again that hard rock which the first time so stubbornly resisted.

The summary tends to leave the ideas of the mysteries meditated upon firmly fixed in the understanding, and for this purpose it subjects the person to an exercise considered by psychologists to be exceedingly fruitful, consisting in carefully gathering together recollections of things, allowing the soul to ruminate on them almost without noticing it.

In conclusion, the summary is more closely aligned with meditation than with contemplation, and in fact Saint Ignatius places it only in the First Week, which contains nothing but meditations.

Repetition is more proper to contemplation, and although it is also done in the First Week, it is extraordinarily multiplied in the three remaining Weeks, where everything is contemplation. We note, however, that both the summary and repetition lead us directly and most effectively to the prayer of simplicity: simplicity of ideas, and simplicity of affections or sentiments.



5th METHOD: APPLICATION OF THE SENSES

This is the form of prayer of the final exercise that precedes supper (in the typical *Spiritual Exercises* of a 30-day retreat), and its matter consists of the mysteries contemplated and repeated during the day.

[121] THE FIFTH WILL BE TO APPLY THE FIVE SENSES TO THE FIRST AND SECOND CONTEMPLATION.

After the preparatory prayer and three preludes, it will be profitable with the aid of the imagination to apply the five senses to the subject matter of the First and Second Contemplations in the following manner:

122. FIRST POINT. This consists in seeing in imagination the persons, and in contemplating and meditating in detail the circumstances in which they are, and then in drawing some fruit from what has been seen.

123. SECOND POINT. This is to hear what they are saying, or what they might say, and then by reflecting on oneself to draw some profit from what has been heard.

124. THIRD POINT. This is to smell the infinite fragrance, and taste the infinite sweetness of the divinity. Likewise to apply these senses to the soul and its virtues, and to all according to the person we are contemplating, and to draw fruit from this.

125. FOURTH POINT. This is to apply the sense of touch, for example, by embracing and kissing the place where the persons stand or are seated, always taking care to draw some fruit from this.

126. COLLOQUY. Conclude with a colloquy and with an Our Father as in the First and Second Contemplations.

The official *Directory of the Spiritual Exercises* devotes a special chapter to the application of the senses and says the following:

> “The fifth exercise, which is the application of the senses, is very easy and useful, imagining that we see the persons, and that we hear the words or the sound, if there is any; that we touch or kiss the places or the persons—something that must be done with great reverence, modesty, and fear. Our Father Saint Ignatius applies the sense of smell to perceiving the fragrance of the soul through the gifts of God, and taste to savoring sweetness; each of these requires a certain presence of the object or of the persons we meditate upon, accompanied by delight and tender love toward them (...)

> The application of the senses does not engage in discursive reasoning, but simply dwells on those sensible things by seeing, hearing, and performing other acts, in which one takes delight with spiritual enjoyment and fruit.

> There are two benefits of the application of the senses: **when the soul cannot contemplate deeper things**, by dwelling on the senses it is gradually prepared to rise to those higher things; or, on the contrary, **when the soul is already very full of devotion** through knowledge of those higher mysteries, by descending to these sensible things it finds abundant nourishment, consolation, and fruit everywhere, because the abundance of love makes even the most insignificant things (a simple movement of the head, for example) highly valued, finding in them matter for love and consolation.”²

An exhortation from the prologue to the **Life of Jesus Christ**, cited in the following words both by Fr. Gil González Dávila and by the official **Directory**³, says:

> “If you wish,” says Saint Bonaventure, “to draw profit from these things, make yourself present to what is recounted as having been done and said by our Lord Jesus Christ, as if you were seeing Him with your eyes and hearing Him with your ears, with all the interest and affection of your heart, with great attentiveness and delight, setting aside every other concern and care.”

All this material on the application of the senses is explained very well by Fr. Lapuente. First, he firmly establishes the psychological foundation for the existence of the spiritual senses by saying:

“Just as the body has its five exterior senses by which it perceives the visible and delightful things of this life and gains experience of them, so the spirit, with its powers of understanding and will, has five interior acts proportioned to these senses, which we call spiritual seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. By these it perceives the invisible and delightful things of God and gains experience of them. From this arises the knowledge or experimental understanding of God, which incomparably surpasses all knowledge that proceeds from our discursive reasoning—just as the sweetness of honey is known far better by tasting a little of it than by making lengthy discourses in order to know it. And thus, through these experiences, mystical theology is attained, which is the savory wisdom and science of God. This is attained by means of these five interior senses, of which Sacred Scripture and the Holy Fathers make frequent mention, especially Saint Augustine, Saint Gregory, Saint Bernard, and others, whose sayings Saint Bonaventure cites at length in the *Treatise on the Seven Ways of Eternity*, in the sixth way.”

He continues describing how this application of the senses is to be carried out:

“It is a mode more of contemplation than of meditation; for meditation moves discursively from one thing to another in search of hidden truths, as has been done up to now; but contemplation is a simple gaze upon the truth, without a variety of discourses, accompanied by great affections of admiration and love. And just as it is ordinarily attained after meditation, so after having meditated on these mysteries of Christ our Lord, it is fitting to go over each one again by means of this affective mode of contemplation which we call the application of the senses. For just as the senses perceive their objects and take delight and savor in them, so in this contemplation the interior senses of the soul—which are its very interior powers—by the variety of their acts, without new discourses, presupposing those already made at other times, perceive these truths and draw from them marvelous affections

of devotion, our Lord forestalling this by His special grace, without which we will not succeed in entering into such a mode of contemplation.”

This is already a very advanced step: it is to place ourselves at the very threshold of mystical contemplation and of that sensing of the divinity as present within us, since smelling and tasting require that their objects not be far from us or outside of us, but very near and touching our palate.

If the Lord deigns to touch the soul interiorly and allows it to feel His presence in its depths through some of His mystical graces, at that very moment it will savor the gentleness and sweetness of the divinity—something that often occurs in the Exercises.

When this intervention of a higher order is lacking, one must proceed at this point as in the meditation on hell; that is, one must then bring to memory those things in which spiritual gentleness and sweetness have been felt most intensely, activate oneself in them until they are felt again; and when this occurs, apply that felt gentleness and sweetness to the divinity or to the soul, to the virtues, and to everything that belongs to the sacred persons, thinking that such gentleness and sweetness are found in them in a far higher degree.

Consolations can be a powerful help, since they are a cause of gentleness and sweetness in the just soul. In the second set of rules for the discernment of spirits, Saint Ignatius instructs that if the soul has been deceived under the appearance of good by the enemy, it should examine the whole process “of the good thoughts which he brought to it, and their beginning, and how little by little he sought to make it descend from the spiritual sweetness and joy in which it was” [334].

Concerning the way spirits touch the soul, he writes that “in those who proceed from good to better, the good angel touches the soul gently, lightly, and sweetly, like a drop of water entering a sponge; and the evil one touches sharply and with noise and disturbance, like when a drop of water falls upon a stone” [335].

The fourth point is “to touch with the sense of touch, such as embracing and kissing the places where such persons tread and sit, always striving to draw profit from it” [125].

The way of putting this point into practice is simple. But let us note in passing the great reverence that Saint Ignatius asks of us in our interior dealings with Jesus Christ and the other sacred persons, even when the expansion of feeling reaches its height and devotion is greatest. “To embrace and kiss the places,” he says—not the persons themselves, nor even their garments. By this procedure the Saint removes us from every danger of spiritual sensualism, into which the illuminist sects have so frequently fallen.

Having now explained the forms of prayer, let us once again weigh the worthlessness of the reproaches rashly hurled against the Ignatian system of prayer, branding it as excessively dry, mechanical, or opposed—or at least alien—to that contemplation which enlarges the spirit.

The remaining ways of prayer that Saint Ignatius proposes are typical for the 30 days retreat, and so we will not discuss them here at length, but I will only briefly mention them and encourage you to read through them at some point.

THE FIRST METHOD OF PRAYER [238—248]

The First Method of Prayer is on the Ten Commandments, the Seven Capital Sins, the three powers of the soul, and the five senses.

“This manner of praying is not meant so much to provide a form and method of prayer properly so called, but rather to supply a way of proceeding and some practices by which the soul may prepare itself and profit so that its prayer may be acceptable to God.”

1. Before beginning, recollect myself and consider where I am going, and for what purpose.
2. Preparatory Prayer: e.g. on 10 Commandments, *“ask God our Lord for grace to know how I have failed in the observance of the Ten Commandments, and also for grace and help to amend for the future. I will beg for a perfect understanding of them in order to observe them better and glorify and praise the Divine Majesty more.”*
3. Think over each Commandment over the space of time it takes to recite the Our Father & Hail Mary: how have I observed it? How have I failed?
4. Ask for forgiveness for faults and say an Our Father

SECOND METHOD OF PRAYER [249—257]

“This consists in contemplating the meaning of each word of a prayer”.

Similar preparation as in the previous method, then...

e.g. One begins saying, “Our Father”, and one stops on the word Father. *“Then let him say, “Father,” and continue meditating upon this word as long as he finds various meanings, comparisons, relish, and consolation in the consideration of it.”*

You do this with each word for an hour.

“THIRD METHOD OF PRAYER A MEASURED RHYTHMICAL RECITATION” [258]

“METHOD. This is as follows: With each breath or respiration, one should pray mentally while saying a single word of the Our Father, or other prayer that is being recited, in such a way that from one breath to another a single word is said. For this same space of time, the attention is chiefly directed to the meaning of the word, to the person who is addressed, to our own lowliness, or the difference between the greatness of the person and our own littleness.”

With this, we conclude our conference on the modes of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises. I pray that God grants you all that you search for in these days of Spiritual Exercises as you enter into contact with Him in profound prayer.