

Introduction

A group of business professionals was gathered for their monthly luncheon. As was their custom once each year, they invited their pastors to join them. After the meal they had scheduled a famous actor to provide some entertainment as people were enjoying coffee and dessert. The actor stood before them dramatically reciting lines from famous plays and poetry. At one point he invited requests from those in attendance. One elderly priest rose and spoke. "Would you recite for us Psalm 23?" The actor, a bit surprised by the unusual request, finally agreed. "Father," he said, "I'll agree to your request under one condition. After I recite the psalm, I'd be honored if you would then recite it too." Reluctantly, the elderly priest agreed.

So the actor presented a stunningly beautiful recitation of Psalm 23, to which people responded with enthusiastic applause. Then he turned to the priest and said, "Okay, Father, your turn." So the priest rather hesitantly stood and began reciting the famous psalm. "The Lord is my shepherd. There is nothing I shall want."

When he finished, there was no applause, just hushed silence. The people, so moved by his simple recitation, were sitting with tears running down their faces. After a few moments the actor rose and spoke. "Ladies and gentlemen, I spoke to your ears. But this man has spoken to your hearts. And here's the difference. I know Psalm 23. But this man knows the Shepherd."

Sometimes we mistakenly think that our faith is about understanding the truths of our faith, or professing a particular creed of

beliefs, or learning the Holy Scriptures. But these things are only secondary. Our faith, at its core, is about our relationship with God, and with Jesus, the one who showed us the face of God.

St. Ignatius of Loyola, best known for his handbook for retreats, truly understood this. The *Spiritual Exercises* are essentially a journey with Jesus. Through a series of “contemplations,” a retreatant follows Jesus through his life, from his birth to resurrection. By watching Jesus, listening, spending time with him, a person is drawn into a deeper relationship with him. Jesus becomes both our Lord and friend, and we become his disciples. This is the heart of our faith.

The “exercises” in this book are loosely based on the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius. Their goal is the same: to draw a person into a real, living, growing relationship with Jesus. But the language is simple and prayerful and certainly not intimidating for anyone wishing to pray this way. And these exercises are based on the same concept of contemplation as the means to achieve a deeper relationship with Jesus.

The prayer of contemplation may be a bit new to some. It should not be confused with meditation, which can be primarily an intellectual venture of coming to “understand” the meaning of a Scripture passage. Contemplation certainly involves understanding, but it embraces an understanding of both the heart and mind. In contemplative prayer a person uses the power of imagination to enter into the story of Jesus as presented in Scripture. We allow ourselves to become one of the people in the Bible story, to see, hear, smell, taste, and respond to what is going on.

These exercises are not just for special times of retreat. You can use them just as effectively in your daily prayer. But they do require a commitment of time. This kind of prayer cannot be rushed. Do them when you can set aside a half hour or more to spend time with God. You might imagine it as time you are spending in the presence of your dearest friend. This is not a prayer of words. In fact, it is better to imagine ourselves as simply watching and listening than to feel compelled to say something. This may be hard for many of us and may take some time to get used to. But it is well worth the effort.

Each of the following exercises provides four elements designed to be of help during the time of prayer: 1) Preparation, 2) Reflection, 3) Things to Consider, and 4) Closing Prayer. These are meant to provide a place to begin and a bit of structure. However, the most important thing when we pray is that we follow the lead of God's Spirit. As we enter into the prayer, we may find ourselves drawn in another direction. Or we may find that one particular point, or one image, seems to capture our heart and our attention. These are moments of grace and we should always stay in that place and savor the goodness of them. Please don't feel compelled to rush to finish the entire exercise. Rather, stay with what brings you light, freedom, peace, and consolation.

As you work your way through these contemplations, it's very helpful to keep a prayer journal or notebook to write down your reflections and experiences. This is a wonderful way to remember what happened as you prayed. Sometimes there may not be much to write because the journey of prayer also includes moments of emptiness and barrenness when it seems that nothing is happening. But at other times there will be moments of great consolation and intimacy with Jesus. A prayer journal can help you hold onto these and allow you to look back and see more clearly the hand of God in your life.

St. Ignatius's notion of a person in relationship with Jesus is that he or she becomes a "contemplative in action." By this he meant that prayer would become such a part of our lives that the line separating times of prayer and the rest of our daily activity would begin to fade. In other words, we can begin to carry our prayerfulness with us as we go about our daily activities. When we love someone, we carry the presence of that person with us even when we're not consciously thinking about them. Those we love may come to mind for a few moments while we are driving in the car or doing our grocery shopping. And we spend a few moments being grateful for their presence in our lives. This same dynamic can be true of our relationship with God.

Some people find that music helps them to pray. Each exercise will suggest an appropriate piece of music to accompany it. (An Ap-

pendix in the back of the book lists the collections where you can find each of these pieces of music.) You might use the piece of music to help quiet your soul and focus your mind and heart. Or you might play the music throughout your day to help you recall your time of prayer. If the music is helpful, use it. If not, it's certainly not necessary to the integrity of these exercises.

As Christians we are commissioned by the Risen Jesus to be witnesses of what we have seen and heard:

Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

✦ MATTHEW 28:16–20

The Good News that we proclaim and witness to is not something written in a book. It is a Person. May these contemplation exercises help you to come to know and love Jesus in a new way. Walk with him on the sacred path and he will reveal himself to you. And most of all, you will come to know how much he loves you.