

WEEK FOUR

Knowing Jesus

This week we move into the **Second Week** or main section of the Spiritual Exercises. In the First Week, we savored the grace of being loved by God in our sinfulness. In the Second Week, we naturally respond to God's mercy by wanting to get to know this God who is so generous and loving, who calls us by name, just as we are.

In the Second Week, we accompany Jesus in his earthly ministry. We seek not scientific or biographical facts about Jesus, but a knowledge more akin to knowing a friend in mystery and depth—a heartfelt knowledge.

We will reflect on Jesus' public ministry later in this prayer adventure. This week we will reflect on the Incarnation and Jesus' birth and early life.

This week uses a technique of Ignatian prayer called imaginative contemplation. This way of praying involves imaginatively placing yourself in the Gospel scene as if you were a participant in the event. The idea is to gain a deep heartfelt connection with Jesus and his work.

Day One: Contemplation on the Incarnation

We begin by looking at the big picture. Last week we reflected on sin and its terrible effects on us and our world. Now we contemplate the Incarnation of Jesus – God’s response to sin.

In the contemplation on the Incarnation, we gaze on the world with the Trinity – with God who is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. We get lost in the mystery of the Incarnation. We marvel at how God works through ordinary people like Mary and Joseph. We are filled with great gratitude because God wanted to get close to us by becoming human in Jesus of Nazareth. In this way, God makes divine love imminently available to all people.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: a deeply felt knowledge of God’s dream for the world; awe and wonder at the mystery of the Incarnation.

Contemplate the Incarnation

We begin the contemplation by imagining the three Divine Persons gazing on “the whole surface or circuit of the world, full of people.” (SE 102)

Consider what the Divine Persons (and you) see and hear: men and women of different sizes, shapes, and colors; rich and poor; old and young. People speaking different languages. Some being born, others dying; some running and playing, others sick and suffering. Some laughing, others crying. Some screaming and shouting, others praying and singing.

With the gaze of the Trinity, consider how people are treating one another: some loving, others hating; some hugging, others hitting; some helping, others ignoring, hurting, and killing. What do you see and hear?

How do you feel as you imagine the world in this way? How do the three Divine Persons respond to the joys and sufferings of the world? How does the God who is Love respond to us, God’s children, who are lost, aimless, suffering, sinning, confused, and hurting?

Hear the Divine Persons saying, “Let us work the redemption of the human race.” (SE 107)

What words do you want to speak to God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?

For Reflection

Contemplation on the Incarnation

— By Daniel Ruff, SJ

{Editor's note: The following reflections were originally printed in a church bulletin during the season of Advent – however, the exercise can be fruitful throughout the year.}

Part One: The Trinity Looks Down from Heaven

The lion's share of the Spiritual Exercises, perhaps two-thirds, is given over to imaginative contemplation of Gospel episodes from the life of Jesus. The retreatant prays to "see Jesus more clearly, love Him more dearly, and follow him more nearly" as a disciple. (St. Ignatius found the prayer where the authors of *Godspell* found it; it was written by Richard of Chichester in the 1200s.) The Exercises begin at the beginning of the life of Jesus; the first contemplation is of the moment of Jesus' conception (yes, St. Ignatius was pro-life). The prayer, as Ignatius envisions it, is a diptych. The first "panel" is God's decision and offer; the second "panel" is Mary's human response.

The first part of the meditation emerges not from the Gospels, but from Ignatius's imagination. After collecting him- or herself, becoming aware of God's presence, and asking for "what he or she desires" (to see more clearly, etc.), the retreatant is invited to enter into God's viewpoint. Allowing the Spirit to guide, the person praying is asked to imagine the triune God, before the moment of Jesus' conception:

looking upon our world: men and women being born and being laid to rest, some getting married and others getting divorced, the old and the young, the rich and the poor, the happy and the sad, so many people aimless, despairing, hateful, and killing, so many undernourished, sick, and dying, so many struggling with life and blind to any meaning. With God, I can hear people laughing and crying, some shouting and screaming, some praying, others cursing.

If you try this at home – and I heartily encourage it during this Advent season – try to pay attention to the Trinity's affective responses to this complicated, messy mass of humanity. Pay attention to your own feelings as well. If you pretend in your imagination to be back in the time before Jesus' coming, how do you feel looking down

“from where God sits” at the mixed, complicated messiness of the unredeemed human condition? Would you respond as the Trinity did?

Then, let the miracle of divine love unfold in your mind’s eye.

The leap of divine joy: God knows that the time has come when the mystery of salvation, hidden from the beginning of the world, will shine into human darkness and confusion. It is as if I can hear the Divine Persons saying, “Let us work the redemption of the whole human race; let us respond to the groaning of all creation.”

The Trinity’s response—O, wonder of wonders!—is to incarnate the Divine Word, the second Person. God the Son will take human flesh as Jesus of Nazareth and become *Emmanuel*, “God with us.” The Trinity’s plan is the mystery of the Incarnation—the very reason for the Advent and Christmas seasons.

Grab 15 or 20 minutes this week and give this prayer exercise a whirl; walk imaginatively in God’s shoes for a while. See what it does for your heart and your spirit. Fall in love with God and Jesus. Feel free to discuss what you are seeing and feeling in prayer with God—with any or all of the three Persons. Maybe thank Jesus Christ for his willingness to become human. In the next article I’ll look at the other “panel” of the diptych—Mary’s response to God’s initiative in the Lucan scene of the Annunciation.

Contemplation on the Incarnation

Part Two: Mary’s Human Response

A recurring pattern in the Spiritual Exercises has St. Ignatius starting the retreatant off praying at the “cosmic” level, and then leading him or her gradually to the more intimate and personal plane. This pattern is certainly operational in the Ignatian contemplation on the Incarnation.

Thus, as I discussed in the previous article, Ignatius invites the retreatant to enter imaginatively into the God’s-eye view of the unredeemed human condition in the first “panel” of the diptych. (I always think of those spectacular photos of the earth taken from the space shuttle.) Responding with a “leap of divine joy” born of love, the triune God decides to “work the redemption of the whole human race.”

Note, then, the dramatic shift as one moves to the second “panel” of the diptych. The subject matter of the second half of the meditation is found in Luke 1:26-38, the account

of the Annunciation. As Fr. Fleming puts it, "I try to stay with the eyes of God, and look upon the young girl Mary as she is greeted by God's messenger, Gabriel."

Give this a try during Advent. Be present to the scene, "hearing the nuances of the questions, seeing the expression in the face and eyes [of Mary], watching the gestures and movements which tell us so much about a person." In other words, get to know Mary intimately "this young, simple girl from a small town whose yes to God makes possible the redemption of the whole human race."

Keep the cosmic sweep, the eternal significance of what the Triune God is doing, as a backdrop. But then, zoom in for the close-up on the surprising ordinariness of the scene: an obscure provincial town, a humble single-room dwelling. A young girl, not long past puberty, of ordinary lineage and meager means. As your imagination presents her, is she doing housework? Perhaps embroidering a towel? Maybe praying or daydreaming?

Into this mundane domestic setting comes the angel, Gabriel. And what is *that* like? Does the angel have wings, as in so many paintings? In one famous and beautiful rendering by Henry Ossawa Tanner, housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the angel is depicted as a glowing column of light at the foot of the bed where an adolescent Mary is seated. How does Mary react to this divine intrusion? How would you react? Luke reports that she is "troubled" at the angel's words and ponders, "what sort of greeting this might be." (*"Oh, Lord! What does one say to an angel? Why me? And what on earth could God possibly want?"*)

Encouraging her not to be afraid, Gabriel announces that she has, "found favor with God," and will conceive and bear a son to be named Jesus. "He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." If you were 14 or 15, what would you make of all that? Would you perhaps wonder if you were ill and hallucinating? Would you wonder, *What will my parents say? And Joseph?!?*

As it happens, Mary asks a practical question. *How can all this come to pass?* Maybe she is partly reasoning with herself. She is, after all, a virgin. The response comes, "The holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God." Wow! Is that helpful? Is it welcome news? Or is it just scarier and more confusing? Yet somehow, Mary finds the inner courage and strength and faith to respond, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word."

As you immerse yourself in the mystery of the Incarnation in your mind's eye, "[you] may want just to stay with Mary or with the eternal Word, who has now become human for [you]. [You] may want to speak out [your] joy, [your] thanks, [your] wonder, or [your] praise to the three Divine Persons." The human race waited for centuries of struggle and hope until God made this astonishing and utterly unpredictable move. Allow yourself to wait on God's grace this Advent, hoping and trusting that you will be granted deeper understanding of what all the Christmas fuss is really about.

– (All quotations of the text of the meditation used here are from David L. Fleming, SJ, *Draw Me Into Your Friendship: A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading of the Spiritual Exercises*, St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996.)

– Originally appeared in the bulletin of Old St. Joseph's Church in Philadelphia
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Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Two: The Annunciation

God responds to the “groaning” of creation very concretely. Narrow your imaginative gaze from a broad perspective and focus on the details of how God saves in history: “See in particular the house and rooms of Mary, in the city of Nazareth in the province of Galilee.” (SE 103)

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: a deeply felt knowledge of God’s dream for the world; awe and wonder at the mystery of the Incarnation.

Read Luke 1:26-38

Imagine the sights, sounds, and smells of the scene, when the angel Gabriel greets the young woman. Listen to their conversation. Notice the expressions on their faces and the movement of their bodies. Conclude by praying a colloquy with Mary.

For Reflection

Magnificat

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed:
the Almighty has done great things for me,
and holy is his Name.

He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.

He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has come to the help of his servant Israel
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
the promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children forever.

Journal

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Day Three: The Birth of Jesus

Having rejoiced with Mary in her “yes” to God, we begin to walk with Jesus from his birth, through his hidden life and public ministry, to the foot of the cross at Calvary.

In these weeks, we ask repeatedly for a grace fundamental to the Second Week of the Exercises: “to know Jesus *more* intimately, to love him *more* intensely, and to follow him *more* closely.” (SE 104) This idea of the “more” – encapsulated in the Latin word, *magis* – is vital for Ignatius. The Exercises are intended to tap into a zeal that impels us to more knowledge, love, and service of God and others.

The order of these graces is important. We can’t rush to find out what our calling in life is, without really knowing the One who calls us. If we focus on first knowing and loving Jesus, then the call to serve becomes clearer and we can approach it with less fear. We really cannot love someone unless we first know him or her on some deeply personal level. Ultimately, it is possible to follow Jesus only if we are rooted in our love for him.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: to know Jesus more intimately, to love him more intensely, and to follow him more closely.

Read Luke 2:1-7

Contemplate the scene of Jesus’ birth. Ignatius suggests placing yourself directly in the scene:

See the persons; that is, to see Our Lady, Joseph, the maidservant, and the infant Jesus after his birth. I will make myself a poor, little, and unworthy slave, gazing at them, contemplating them, and serving them in their needs, just as if I were there, with all possible respect and reverence.
(SE 114)

For Reflection

Some Insight into Redemption

Consider a blissfully happy couple finding all they need in one another. For no other reason than generosity and the desire to share their happiness, they decide to adopt

children as their own. From then on their life undergoes a profound change. Now they are vulnerable; their happiness is wrapped up in the welfare of the children; things can never be the same again.

If the children choose to alienate themselves and start on the path to ruin, the couple are stricken. They will plead, humble themselves, make huge sacrifices, go out of themselves to get their loved ones to understand that the home is still their home, that the love they have been given is unchanging.

This perhaps, gives us some insight into redemption. In a mystery we cannot fathom, God “empties,” “loses” Himself, in bringing back to Himself His estranged, lost children. And this is all the Father wants. This is the only remedy for His wound. God is no longer pure God, but always God-with-humanity-in-His-heart.

— Ruth Burrows, *Essence of Prayer*

Journal

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Day Four: “Glory to God in the Highest”

Continue contemplating the Nativity. Join the shepherds in the countryside and then journey with them to visit the baby Jesus. As you pray through Jesus’ life, you will notice how often he surrounds himself with people like the shepherds—those who are poor and on the margins of society. Rejoicing in the good news of Jesus’ birth, the shepherds become Jesus’ first disciples.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: to know Jesus more intimately, to love him more intensely, and to follow him more closely.

Read Luke 2:8-20

Accompany the shepherds as they hear the good news and visit the baby Jesus.

For Reflection

The Shepherd Girl’s Experience



“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night”
(Luke 2:8).

I try to imagine night in an ancient land and myself in it, millennia before the mechanical hum of machines and motors entered the world. I try to think of the most natural quiet I have ever known, maybe after a fresh nighttime snow. Maybe the expectant hush that falls over the crowd as the houselights go down and the conductor raises his baton. Maybe a holy hour in the dead of night when it's just me and Jesus — that still quiet that is filled with presence, the holy, mystical touch of God.

When I close my eyes, I imagine I am one of the shepherds, the youngest of them, very little, nothing but a child, and the whole world exists for me, just as it does for all children.

The air is clear and chilly, and there is dew on the grass. I hear the faint movement of the herds, the soft night sounds of a world at rest. Herd animals have an aroma of their own at night; they take on the warm and reassuring smell of sleeping beasts — it is as though their very slumber has a fragrance. I am quiet and calm and at peace in all of this, even in my own nothingness. As it often does, my gaze turns toward the heavens, the glory of the stars, the vast, hovering universe stretching out over the fields, over me, and my mind is filled with a child's wonder.

Suddenly the sky erupts with light and singing. It is frightening, confusing, and I shield myself. *What could this be?* There are voices and beings, brightness beyond imagining, sounds I've never heard, and after some moments the sky goes dark again, the stars reappear, but nothing will ever be the same. A startled silence falls over the other shepherds and then I hear the word — though I barely know what it means: "angel."

Everyone starts running, and I cannot understand what is going on nor do I know where they are going, but I follow along with the others. What else would a child do?

It is dark, but our feet fly. We are light and quick. We do not miss a step. Until in the distance I see we are approaching a cave — only it is illuminated, not cold, dark, damp but a warm, living, glowing sort of place. As we draw nearer, the other shepherds slow down, and when we are quite close, they stop and kneel. I kneel too. I think I should keep my head down, but I want to sneak a glance. There is something — someone — ahead in that cave. Dare I look? A woman, a baby. *Didn't the angel say something of this, something of infants and that other word so inviting and mysterious, "savior?"*

We are captivated, speechless. Then one, the oldest and wisest of us, thinks to approach this woman, and the woman says, "Wait a moment," and then she turns to look directly at me. She gestures for me to come forward. And I can see the head shepherd is taken

aback, confused by this, as if to say, “What could you possibly want with her?” He is a humble, good man, hardworking and honest; it’s disorienting to see him confounded.

But I go. Though I have no sense of what is taking place or who she is, it seems I cannot resist her invitation to approach, and when I get closer, I see she’s so beautiful and lovely and superb in every way. She smiles at me, and I draw nearer. We look down on the baby in her arms together.

I say, “He’s so small.”

And she says, “Yes, babies are very little.”

“He’s so soft,” I say, and she smiles and nods. “He smells good,” I say, and she laughs a little.

“Yes, so sweet,” she says. Then somehow I am in her lap and so is the baby. She is holding me, and I am holding him. And then he takes my finger – curls his little fist around my own child’s finger – and squeezes. And I look at this beautiful woman and say, “Look! He’s touching me.”

Her whole expression changes, deepens, and she says, “Yes, he is.”

He is touching me, touching my heart, in this prayer, in this meditation, and in that slightest connection, sending a world of healing, oceans of grace, a universe of glory pulsing through an infant’s grip.

Child, how I love you!

Then I remember the question I had been asking: “Why did you come? Why pour all your glory and power into one little baby?”

And he says to me, not in words, but through that little innocent fist, this helpless little creature, “So I could touch you, flesh of my flesh.”

I believe him down to my bones.

– Excerpted from *Jesus Approaches* by Elizabeth M. Kelly

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Five: Jesus is Presented in the Temple

We continue to contemplate the early life of Jesus. We notice how Jesus grows up in a particular social, economic, political, and religious context. Even in the comforting stories of the Nativity, we see the beginnings of opposition against Jesus. We cannot separate the saving work of Christ from the times in which he lived. Salvation does not take place apart from the world, as if God were throwing a lifeline down from heaven and pulling us up. Instead, God saves *in* the world.

In the Gospel contemplations, Ignatius often instructs us to pray “so as to draw some profit.” This does not mean that we have to be “productive” when we pray, analyzing the text to find some insightful application. The review of prayer (journaling) is a better time to use the intellect to draw real-world applications. In contemplation, we let our prayer affect us and touch our hearts. We allow memories, emotions, desires, and longings to be stirred as God wishes.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: to know Jesus more intimately, to love him more intensely, and to follow him more closely.

Read Luke 2:21-38

Accompany the Holy Family as Jesus is named and then presented in the temple. Join Simeon and Anna as they wait for Jesus and then as they meet him.

As you marvel at the child Jesus, what hopes spring in your heart? What names do you give the child?

For Reflection

A Sense of Reverence

Ignatius believed that anyone who prayerfully considers the basic truth that we are created out of love by a transcendent God of holiness will grow in a sense of reverence. We will have a deepened sense of the sacredness of all things if we think of everything as continually being called and sustained in being by God. We will stand in awe not just before sunsets and mountains, flowers and trees, but also, and especially, before every

person we meet. Reverence is a disposition of a heart that allows us to live before the beauty and goodness of every creature and the God who made them.

– **Gerald M. Fagin, SJ**, *Putting on the Heart of Christ*

Journal

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Day Six: Exile in Egypt

God continues to save us in the details of our lives today, in the beauty and messiness of our world. As we pray in the midst of daily life, we may become more sensitive to the joys and tragedies of our world and to the needs of people around us. In accompanying the Holy Family in their flight to Egypt and their return to Nazareth, how can we not feel deeply the plight of millions of displaced persons in our world? How can we not be more attentive to the supports and the pressures that young families experience today?

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: to know Jesus more intimately, to love him more intensely, and to follow him more closely.

Read Matthew 2:13-23

Accompany Joseph, Mary, and Jesus as they escape into exile. Spend time with them in Egypt, and join them on their return to Nazareth.

For Reflection

Women of Goodness

Gary Smith, SJ, on Sudanese refugee mothers:

“I have known and wept with and consoled the Sudanese refugee woman, particularly as she is a mother. When you know her as a mother, you understand how she can age so quickly. The Sudanese refugee mother is poor and frequently has a baby strapped to her back or nursing at her breast. She is always working – sweeping, cooking, cleaning, carrying huge loads on her head – and is often pregnant; most likely, she has had children who have died of malaria. She is friendly and long-suffering, loves to talk and joke with her sisters, is close to her tribe and clan, most often cannot read or write, and is born into and suffers from a rigid male-dominated culture. She dies young. Often she is old before her time, but she possesses an interior beauty that endures until she dies. She would die in an eye blink for her family.

“I have buried her after childbirth. I have anointed her as she was dying of some tropical disease. I have given her alms when she has extended her hand, fingers lost to leprosy. I have raced my car over impossible roads to get her to a clinic where she can deliver her baby. I have been with her when she is dying of the shock of a breech birth, a little foot sticking out of her body. I have helped her younger daughters continue with their studies in the face of a cultural attitude that educating a girl child is not necessary – an attitude she has faced firsthand. I have fallen in love with the African mother, whose goodness and beauty have left me shaking.

“One day, such a mother, Mary Kenyi, came to me. Her old body was covered in a threadbare dress. She often came by, asking for a few beans or some grain and sometimes for a blanket. She has nothing, not even a son or daughter to care for her in her old age. All of her children were killed in the Sudan civil war, along with her husband. I saw her, a long walking stick in hand, coming toward me as I was conversing with a staff member outside our compound. I thought to myself, *perhaps with an edge of irritation*, I wonder what she will be asking for today? She carried a small plastic bag and handed it to me, giving me a smile that would capture the heart of the most heartless.

“In the bag was a gift for me.

Three eggs.”

– From *They Come Back Singing: Finding God with the Refugees*

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Seven: Jesus Teaches in the Temple

The years of Jesus' boyhood and young adulthood in Nazareth are mentioned only briefly in the Gospels. You will supply many of the details through imaginative prayer. We ask the Spirit to show us what Jesus was like growing up. Accompany him as a friend, relative, or neighbor in Nazareth. Though fully divine, Jesus is also fully human (like us in all things but sin, our tradition teaches). Notice, then, how Jesus grows into his humanity.

It doesn't matter whether the details you supply are historically accurate. We are not reconstructing history. Instead, with the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we are coming to know Jesus more intimately so that we can love him more dearly and follow him more closely.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: to know Jesus more intimately, to love him more intensely, and to follow him more closely.

Read Luke 2:41-50

Accompany Jesus on his journey to the temple, where he experiences a deepening sense of his vocation. Be present to Mary and Joseph in their concern. Share with them the experiences of your own youth and how you feel about them now, looking back.

For Reflection

Draw Me into Your Friendship

Lord Jesus, from the start
You invite ordinary people to come to where you live.
When they come, you welcome them
and call them to labor and rejoice with you.
You are the most beautiful among all men,
and I hardly believe you want me for your friend.

You are powerful, Lord.
Draw me more and more into your friendship
and lead me along the way you took with friends.

— Joseph Tetlow, SJ, *Hearts on Fire*

Journal

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