



The Ignatian Imagination

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Getting Real with God

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“**Y**our Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Mt 6:8). Jesus’ words in Matthew’s gospel, though unquestionably true, often have the unintended effect of holding people back in prayer. It is not infrequent that people will tell me of a situation in their lives that is heavy on their hearts or a dream or hope they are harboring, and when I ask if they have said to God what they just shared with me, the response is, “No, but God already knows.” True enough. God does already know. But that is not the point.

It usually seems that we are the ones who initiate prayer. The reality, however, is that the initiative is with God. It is God who loves us first (1 Jn 4:19). God creates us in love, for love, and it is out of that same love that God calls us to communion with God in prayer. In other words, God creates me for and invites me into relationship with God, and a primary way that I grow (or God “grows” me, God creates me) in that relationship is through prayer.

Let’s go back to the idea that I don’t need to tell God what’s on my mind and in my heart because God already knows. The misunderstanding in such a belief is the idea that telling God such things is about imparting information, which it is not. When I share my thoughts, feelings, etc. in prayer, it is not to inform God but *to be and to share myself, as I am here and now, with God*. It is about getting real. It is analogous to those times when I simply *am* in the presence of a beloved friend, spouse, parent, child, etc. and together we bask in, with or without words, the wonder of each other and the gift of the love that binds us. When God and I are together in this way, it is good to recognize, once again, that my very desire to share myself as I am with God is a gift, a manifestation of God’s initiative and invitation to me to spend real time together.

So what might getting real with God look like more specifically? How might I approach God in prayer more authentically and openly?

Acknowledging God’s Presence

There is a beautifully simple yet profound exercise that can help me to become increasingly transparent—more real—before God in prayer. St. Ignatius of Loyola encourages me as I begin prayer to consider how God is looking at me. He writes, “a step or two in front of the place where I am to contemplate or meditate, I will stand for the length of an Our Father, raising my mind above and considering how God our Lord is looking at me, etc., and make an act of reverence or humility.” In other words, I begin my prayer as I do in any encounter with someone for whom I care. I consciously direct my attention to him or her and allow myself to become aware that s/he is present and directing his or her attention toward me. I pay attention to God paying attention to me.

The “etc.” in Ignatius’ description is easily overlooked but important to note. Why does he add “etc.”? It points to the *effect* that looking at God looking at me can have on me. We not only notice, but we *take notice* of one another. We *take time to gaze* upon one another and acknowledge each other and the bond between us. It is a look of friends anticipating their time together; it is a look of love. British Jesuit

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *The Ignatian Imagination*, an occasional publication of the Ignatian Spirituality Program of Denver! In it you will find reflections on prayer and the spiritual life to help you more fully engage in your relationship with God. If there are specific topics you would like to see discussed, please email your suggestions to ignatianspiritualitydenver@hotmail.com.

Robert Marsh describes it in this way, “When I look at the God who looks at me, it is not a matter simply of seeing the other as one object among many, but of looking, gazing, contemplating. We *see* each other. The look transforms—it is *encounter*.” Let’s imagine further what such an encounter might look like.

I begin by looking at God who is looking at me. How is it that I experience God’s gaze? Do I see in my interior vision God looking at me, or is the experience more tactile than visual, and I *feel* rather than see God’s gaze upon me, or do I perhaps *hear* God speaking to me? How exactly do I experience God present with me? It may happen that I do not sense God present with me even though faith tells me that God is near. Perhaps God feels entirely, even painfully, absent. I want in any case to allow myself to become aware of how I am experiencing God’s presence or seeming absence and how it is affecting me.

If I am being given the grace of sensing God’s presence, what is God like? Is God inviting or awe-inspiring, cool or warm, playful or serious, curious or knowing, soft or piercing, arousing or calming, etc.? If God feels absent, what is that absence like? What is it evoking in me? As I find my own words to describe my experience, I want to tell God what I sense (or don’t sense), just as I tell a friend what I experience when I am with him or her. I also want to share the thoughts, emotions, physical sensations, desires, etc. that come to me.

Expressing my experience of God’s gaze to God is a simple and profound exercise in being real. It helps me to see God more clearly, to understand better myself and my reactions to God, and to become more transparent before God through my sharing with God. There is truly no limit to this kind of intimacy with one another. As I reveal what is going on in me to God, I also will want to wait, watch, listen, and give God time to be and share with me as God desires. It is what real friends do.

Coming to God as I Am

Keeping with this idea of friendship, a helpful image for going to God in prayer might be that of going over to a dear friend’s house for a visit. [William A. Barry, SJ writes extensively on how God desires our friendship. See especially *A Friendship Like No Other: Experiencing God’s Amazing Embrace* published by Loyola Press.] I imagine that as I metaphorically approach God’s house a sign that would likely hang over the door would read, “Come as

You Are.” (Another sign nearby might say, “You Will Never Leave Here the Same,” but that is a topic for another article.) What does it mean, to come to God as I am? Quite simply, that God in God’s goodness and mercy always meets me where I am. So, where am I? Often, the answer is “all over the place.”

A common concern of people who pray is that when I do go to pray, my mind is on anything and everything other than God. Distractions fill my head, and the very thing I want to do (focus on God), I seemingly cannot do. (Do these words sound familiar? St. Paul had the same trouble [Rom 7:15].) What to do? Get real.

Getting real with God also means being humble enough to show God the very things that seem to be distractions from prayer: “Here I am, Lord, wanting to pay attention only to you, yet distracted with this concern or preoccupation.” The truth is that there is nothing in my life of which God does not want to be a part. There is no care, concern, joy, triumph, challenge or defeat of mine that is outside the bounds of God’s care and interest. So when I come to prayer and find that my attention is not on God but instead, for example, on the hurtful words of my coworker, or how in the world I’m going to finish that project by the deadline, or what I should have said instead of what I did say to my child or spouse or loved one, I can choose to share that “distraction” with God. By taking it to God, I am no longer alone in my thoughts (which is not prayer), but instead am turning my attention to the Lord and asking God to be with me in this aspect of my life (which is prayer).

A Final Question: How Do You Want to Be with Me?

Sometimes when I go to God in prayer, I have an agenda. Other times I have no agenda at all. There is nothing wrong with either. Certainly God wants to hear what is in my mind and on my heart. It is also okay to not “have a plan” every time I go to pray. In fact, getting real with God also means opening myself up *to allow God to set the agenda* for our time together and even inviting God to do so. It can be especially helpful to reach out to God in this way when prayer is dry and God seems absent. The cause of dryness in prayer is often that my focus is on myself, my worries, my wants, my needs, and not on actually being with God. It can be helpful, especially at such times, to return my gaze to God, who is present, who is looking at me, and then simply to ask, “How do you want to be with me?” And then, I want to pay attention.