

Teach your kids imaginative prayer

Is your child a daydreamer? St. Ignatius of Loyola was a daydreamer, too. In fact, his daydreams led him to take up the life of a soldier . . . and then later, to give it up again.

As a child, Ignatius was fond of stories of knightly chivalry (El Cid, the knights of Camelot, the *Song of Roland*). He pursued those romantic ideals in his life as a soldier in the service of the Duke of Nájera—until a cannonball struck his legs, fracturing one in multiple places. During his months-long recovery, the only books he had to read were a collection of saints' stories and the *Life of Christ* by the German theologian Ludolph of Saxony. In it, Ludolph proposes that the reader imaginatively immerse himself in various scenes from the Gospels.

With plenty of time on his hands, Ignatius spent lots of time daydreaming. He imagined the military exploits he might pursue in honor of the Duke and the woman he was in love with. But he also imagined what his life would look like if he modeled it on the lives of St. Francis, St. Dominic, and others. Gradually, he came to realize that the sense of satisfaction he experienced while imagining the life of Christ and the saints lasted, while the thrill of his chivalrous daydreams was fleeting.

He took three things from this experience. First, this period of reflection led him to give up his life as a soldier in order to serve God alone. Second, it led him to realize that God can communicate with us through our imagination and our emotions. And third, it provided the basis for the method of prayer he would later promote to the men who joined the Society of Jesus: imaginative prayer (also known as Ignatian contemplation).

Imaginative prayer isn't just for Jesuits, though. In many ways, it is particularly suited to children, for whom the line between reality and fantasy is often blurred.

Here are the basic steps of imaginative prayer:

- Before beginning, pick a scene from the Bible—preferably, one with a bit of action in it. For the purpose of this example, let's say you choose the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11), which has lots going on, dramatically and symbolically. [Creighton University has an excellent collection of meditations for imaginative prayer that you might find helpful.](#)
- Alternatively, you might choose an episode from the lives of the saints.
- Explain to your child what you'd like to try: "We're going to read this story about Jesus, and then we're going to imagine what it would be like to be in the story."
- Begin by praying to the Holy Spirit to help you "enter" the scene. Then, observe sixty seconds of silence.
- Prayerfully read the text once or twice with your child.

What you do next depends on the age and maturity level of the child.

Older kids and teens

- Invite older kids and teens to spend several minutes silently imagining the scene in detail. If it helps, they might think of themselves as movie directors arranging all of the details of a scene: What is the weather like? Is it cool or warm? What can you smell? What foods are cooking? What are the guests saying? Who are the major characters, and how are they dressed?
- Next, they should place themselves in the scene: Who are they? One of the characters from the Bible, or another

anonymous participant? In any case, they should imagine themselves as physically present in the setting of the scene, not as an omniscient observer.

- Then invite them to let the action of the scene as described in the Bible story unfold . . . but with the addition of details that they supply with their imagination. How does Mary learn that the wine has run out? Do the bride and groom know, and if so, how do they react? What facial expressions do Jesus and Mary wear as they talk? What is the reaction of the guests? And so on.
- After some time—five or ten minutes might suffice for beginners—ask your kids to “come back” and tell you about their experience. The discussion you have is part of the prayer experience, too, because you’re going to focus on teasing out what God might be communicating through the imagined experience. Ask: What happened? Why? How did you feel? Did you speak or act? Did anyone (particularly Jesus) speak to you? And finally: What do you think God might be communicating to you through this experience?

Younger children

- Younger children will probably need more hands-on guidance, so rather than asking them to spend ten minutes silently imagining the scene, try “playing pretend” with them. Make clear that this is a way of praying!
- Your “pretending” might take the form of shared storytelling. Ask your child to supply the details of the story using some of the question prompts above. It may help to use a children’s picture Bible or storybook as a text. Finally, ask: “Well, who would you want to be if you were at the wedding? What would you do? What would you say to Jesus? What would he say to you?”

- Alternatively, you might “act out” your pretending, much as you might play house or store.

As always when you’re praying with little ones, aim high but stay relaxed about the outcome. If things fall apart the first time you try, try again some other time. It sometimes takes experienced Jesuits a while to “get in the groove” with imaginative prayer!

Learn more

[Pray with Your Imagination](#)

By David L. Fleming, SJ, from *What Is Ignatian Spirituality?*

[Examples of Ignatian Imaginative Contemplations](#)

at Creighton Online Ministries