Imaginative prayer is shared experience with Jesus based on stories of Jesus from the Gospels that draw on our use of empathy and visualization. It is meant to be experiential. The purpose is not necessarily to gain new spiritual insights—though these may come—but to deepen your relationship with Jesus.

St. Ignatius of Loyola began his journey looking for that same encounter with Christ. We may want the same thing, but find it’s easier to take action—even good works—to avoid the inner chaos this type of exercise can create. Sometimes it’s easier to think of doing battle for Jesus, rather than risk being sucked under by uncomfortable emotions that might arise if we sit still with God. Or, when reading scripture, we might rather gather information as a retreat into the mind’s storeroom of ideas. It can be easier to ask questions in order to avoid the space in our hearts designed for people.

This Ignatian / Imaginative prayer exercise uses our imagination to skirt the dominance of the analytical mind. It cracks open the door to God, whom we can trust to handle us with care and to fill the emptiness with warmth. As we grow closer, this can add depth to how we share that relationship with those around us.

This exercise begins by picking an action scene from the gospels as a foundation for your prayer. In other words, choose a story in which Jesus is doing something rather than teaching something. For example, Mark 8:22-26

(Jesus and his disciples) came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Can you see anything?” And the man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly. Then he sent him away to his home, saying, “Do not even go into the village.”

A facilitator can read the word in bold, follow directions are in italics.

We’re going to begin by a Slow Down exercise, to quiet ourselves

- Once you get into a comfortable position, close your eyes. Begin to take slow, deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. And inhale enough air so your chest expands. **PAUSE TO THE COUNT OF 30**
- As you continue taking slow, deep breaths, allow your mind to slow down, letting go of any thoughts and worries. Release the tension in your body. Let the stress flow from your muscles. Allow your body to relax. Continue taking slow, deep breaths – in through your nose and out through your mouth. **PAUSE TO THE COUNT OF 60**
- As you continue breathing slow, turn your hands over – palms down. Imagine yourself dropping those things that are weighing you down: your worries, concerns, and frustrations – those things that bring you emotional discomfort and pain. **PAUSE TO THE COUNT OF 60**
- When you feel as though you’ve been able to let these things go, turn your palms up. This represents your readiness to enter into imaginative prayer and receive what God has for you. **PAUSE TO THE COUNT OF 60.**
Prayer following the Slow Down exercise -

- The Lord be with you. (allow for response) Lord, please join us here. Be present with us to guide and protect as we look for a way to be with you. Continue with....
- Relax and listen as I read a passage from Mark (or whichever scripture you choose)
  Read slowly, then PAUSE TO THE COUNT OF 15

- As I read the passage a second time, let your imagination work on the scene. Release your inner critic, you don’t have to reproduce the first-century with forensic accuracy. The point isn’t to see everything “right,” but to be with Jesus. Remember that God uses all of our faculties, including imagination. PAUSE for a moment. As I read put yourself at the scene. Take the place of one of the characters and see the scene through the eyes of that person. Occasionally, I’m going to Freeze Frame a moment and ask you to see, hear, smell or touch the scene with your imagination.

Read the passage again.

(Jesus and his disciples) came to Bethsaida. Some people brought a blind man to him and begged him to touch him.

- Freeze frame: Imagine the location. What time of day is it? What do you smell? What are you wearing? How do your feet feel? What’s the road made of? Is there anything nearby you could touch with your hands? Are there people around you? Where do they come from? Are they shepherds? The disciples? People from the city? Pharisees or scribes? PAUSE TO THE COUNT OF 15
  He took the blind man by the hand and led him out of the village; and when he had put saliva on his eyes and laid his hands on him, he asked him, “Can you see anything?”
- Freeze Frame: What is Jesus doing? Look at the faces in the crowd. What are others thinking or feeling? What do you hear? PAUSE TO THE COUNT OF 15
  And the man looked up and said, “I can see people, but they look like trees, walking.” Then Jesus laid his hands on his eyes again; and he looked intently and his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.
  Then he sent him away to his home, saying, “Do not even go into the village.” As the man moves away, imagine Jesus turning his head.....and making eye contact with you.
- Freeze frame: In this moment, what is Jesus saying to you? PAUSE TO THE COUNT OF 15. What would you like to say to Jesus? PAUSE TO THE COUNT OF 15
- Stay with this moment – between you and Jesus. Talk to him and listen to what he says to you. Spend time in his presence. Allow your imagination to serve your faith.

Allow everyone several minutes to stay still and let their imagination/thoughts go.

Then, ask everyone to -

- Please stay still while I continue. Jesus may not be here the way you imagined him, but he most assuredly is with us, seeing you, listening to you, speaking to you.

Afterthought (but does not need to be read): We’re all looking for love and friendship. Being young is the perfect time to put some thought into what road we’ll take in life, a perfect time to encounter the Lord and decide how best to follow him. A life can be determined by four or five decisions made when we’re young. Sometimes, these are well-considered choices, sometimes not. What if we let God participate? What if we used these Exercises early on, so that discernment might be an integral part of that vital decision process, and not just an afterthought? This Ignatius Prayer exercise and others like it can help that happen....