

Forty Weeks ~ Sacred Story



Week Five

Encouragements & Wisdom

E & W reflections are additional helps for your Sacred Story prayer journey. Reflect on them ahead of your prayer exercises for the week or outside of your fifteen-minute prayer windows during the week.

E & W reflections are additional helps for your yearlong prayer journey. They might best be reflected upon ahead of your prayer exercises for the week and outside of your fifteen-minute prayer windows. So, if you have time on Sunday, sit down somewhere in a quiet corner and read/reflect on the messages. Note which ideas are most profitable for your spiritual practices and return to them often.

Wisdom for Your Fifteen-Minute Prayer Times

What are the fifteen-minute prayer periods?

There are many ways to pray. What you are learning in Sacred Story is a very specific prayer form modeled on St. Ignatius Loyola's Examination of Conscience. We live in a universe of opposed spiritual forces that work on us 24/7. Ignatius' method will awaken us spiritually to see these opposed forces at work in our own personal story—our life—and in the world. This is its purpose and value.

Your fifteen-minute prayer windows for weeks 1-13 are designed to assist you in establishing a daily habit and ritual of taking the time for these windows of prayer. But we are also taking this time to open to Grace so we can listen, awaken and become conscious of how these opposed spiritual forces manifest themselves in that unique, unrepeatable human universe that is the story of my life. We want to allow God to reveal the goodness in our story up to this point in our lives. And we

want God to reveal the general and particular patterns and habits that rob us of life. Our second goal for this first thirteen weeks is to get a fresh start to our life story by experiencing God's healing graces in a confession of our whole history.

How should the fifteen-minute periods be used in weeks 1-13?

Do all the reading and reflection exercises for each week in the fifteen minute prayer windows. You may or may not finish them, but that is fine. Do what you can. Ask God to inspire you as you read to "see" and "hear" what is important to see and hear in the readings. Don't fret with things that are not clear.

Should I change the length of prayer based on my moods?

St Ignatius has given wise advice when he says we should not decrease or increase the time of our prayer periods. Some days, when things are easy, you may want to go 30 minutes. Other days, when things are tough, you may want to do only 3 minutes. This shifting of times, based on your moods, will work powerfully to erode your daily spiritual practice and your daily commitment.

Does this rule of holding fast to the fifteen-minutes ALWAYS apply? There is one occasion when it does not. St. Ignatius said if you are upset, not peaceful or agitated, *extend a prayer period by one minute*. This discipline of extending a prayer period by one minute, during difficult times works powerfully to counteract the negative forces that trouble our hearts, and can often break the spell they hold over us.

Is it better to pray once or twice a day?

Is it better to pray one or two fifteen-minute periods a day? The best is what you can do DAILY. It is the daily ritual that is most important. My studies do reveal that those who pray twice daily are generally more faithful to daily prayer, than those who only choose to pray once.

Why is that? I have an idea. When I have selected to pray only once a day, schedules, fatigue, unexpected events etc. can easily derail the one time a day I scheduled. If I have selected to pray twice daily, chances are that I will be faithful to at least one of the periods of prayer. This is why I think those who **select** twice daily are generally more faithful to a daily discipline. Myself, I pray twice daily: once after lunch, and once in the evening before bed.

If I miss my "fifteen" many days in a row, should I call it quits?

St. Ignatius wrote this to a layman, Jerome Vines, as practical advice on prayer: "Do what you can, calmly and gently. Do not be disturbed about the rest, but

leave to God's providence what you cannot manage yourself. God is well pleased with the earnestness and moderate anxiety with which we attend to our obligations, but He is not pleased with the anxiety which afflicts the soul, because He wishes our limitations and weakness to seek the support of His strength and omnipotence, with the trust that in His goodness, He will supply what is lacking to our weakness and shortcomings. Do not wear yourself out, but make a competent and sufficient effort, and leave the rest to Him who can do all he pleases."¹

So Ignatius tells us: just keep trying; do our best; don't give up and ask God to help you accomplish what you cannot do on your own. Simple!

How do I know if I am praying the “right” way?

I have intentionally been a bit unstructured up to this point with these fifteen-minute prayer periods. I want you to find the time for the prayer first. Gradually, I will introduce the structure that can carry you through the prayer. Don't be anxious about if you are doing it “right.” Are you thinking of God and trying to open your heart to God? Have you been trying to draw fruit from the readings? That is just fine, then. Try not to overanalyze. Prayer, in all its forms, is a relationship between you and God, not a machine that has set functions. Just get those windows of prayer set in your day and we will gradually give them ritual shape to help you in your *relationship* with God who is absolutely delighted you are trying your best to open your heart in prayer.

What is the best time(s) of day for the 15-minute prayer?

During the initial 13 weeks of the year, it is less important when you do the prayer periods and more important to be faithful to some regular discipline. Beginning in week 14, when we start learning the structure of the Ignatian prayer discipline, I would suggest one or two times that help you look backwards over half or all of your day. This prayer discipline is a “review” prayer geared to “listening backwards” in the day for the spiritual movements that were most significant. So, either mid-day and/or after dinner or before bed might be ideal. St. Ignatius suggests this prayer after the mid-day meal and after the evening meal. I do it after lunch and just before bed.

What if readings/prayers make me angry, guilty or feel manipulated?

Here is a short story: A friend recently was complaining how their friend always promised to do things for them, but then never followed through. My friend was REALLY upset by this friend of theirs who ALWAYS did this. They wanted me to affirm their anger, and then to get angry with them at their friend.

¹ William J. Young, S.J., *Letters of St. Ignatius Loyola* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1959), p. 404-5.

Instead I suggested they try to figure out why their friends behavior was so upsetting and anger inducing. They looked up and said: “Oh my goodness, I know exactly why! My dad was an alcoholic and when I was little, he always promised me things, and then forgot to do them when he drank. I don’t think I have ever forgiven him.”

It is fine if you get angry, guilty or feel manipulated. Just don’t waste the opportunity of the anger, guilt or feelings of manipulation! Set aside the drama of the feelings for the time being and ask yourself and God: “WHY DOES THIS MAKE ME FEEL THIS WAY?” God will inspire you just like God inspired my friend, and you may then find yourself in a completely new place in your prayer exercises—and in your life.

What if I need something visual to help me pray?

Perfect! Get a picture of Christ and place it in front of you. Hold a crucifix or a Rosary in your hand. Find a picture of St. Ignatius you like and put him in your place of prayer. Take an image from one of the readings and visualize it in your imagination. Imagine yourself in your favorite church in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament. We are embodied spirits and the sense of touch, taste, sight, smell are part of our spiritual character as well. Do what you find best to help you enter into a sacred place with God in your heart. Give yourself permission. Just remember though, this form of prayer is about attentiveness to spiritual dynamics. Use what you find helpful to aid you in cultivating spiritual radar to listen to your heart.

What if its better for me to read material first and then take what I have read to prayer?

Terrific! Everyone is in a different place in his or her life and should find the best form of digesting the readings and materials for prayer.

*Keep on going forward, just keeping moving forward with the practice.
You never know what gifts may await.*

