

THE EXAMEN: A CLASSIC WAY TO ENGAGE IN DAILY PRAYER

The *examen* is a short prayer devised by St. Ignatius in which you try to see how God was active during your day.

First, you give thanks to God for all of the graces you had received during the day. Anything you were grateful for: the sight of sunlight on the pavement; the taste of an orange; a joke shared with someone; or maybe a particularly rewarding moment at work.

Second, you ask for the grace to see where God had been with you during the day.

Next you review the entire day. Where you had accepted God's grace—in other words, where you had followed what you thought God might want you to do, and where you hadn't. This part of the *examen* is almost like rewinding the day and playing it back, like a movie.

Finally, you ask God for forgiveness of your sins and for the grace to do better the next day.

The whole prayer might last only fifteen minutes, the bulk of it taken up with the review of the day. But despite its length, the *examen* is an extremely helpful method of prayer. In fact, St. Ignatius used to say that if there is only time for one private prayer a day, it should be given over to the *examen*, so much did he value it. It's easy to see why: it's a grace in itself to be able to see where God has been active in your day, what gifts you've received from God, and where you consistently need God's help. The *examen* helps to get your spiritual house in order, quickly.

Page 117 of In Good Company by James Martin, SJ

"A Method of Making the General Examen"

from *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola*

"The first point is to give thanks to God our Lord for the gifts received."

Ignatius once said that the most abominable sin he could imagine was the sin of ingratitude. He knew that an awareness of God's goodness and generosity is the foundation of our relationship with God. Once we recognize God's goodness, we spontaneously feel gratitude.

In this first point, we express gratitude for the experiences and encounters during the day that have been good or pleasant or meaningful, whether they seem trivial or important. We also express gratitude for the larger gifts we have received: our faith and our salvation, our life, our talents and abilities, significant relationships, whatever comes to mind.

As our spiritual life deepens, we become more and more aware that all we have is gift, given to us far beyond anything we might expect or deserve.

We might sometimes find ourselves in a mood of resentment or depression where a feeling

of gratitude is hard to muster. At that time, it is all the more important for us to express thanks to God. Not to pretend to feelings we don't feel, but to acknowledge, at whatever level we can, the truth of God's goodness to us.

"The second point is to ask for the grace to know my sins and to root them out."

Ignatius gives his second point a moralistic tone. The particular grace we are seeking here can be expressed more broadly as the light to see our life the way that God sees it, without the illusions and deceptions that we commonly live by. If we are to ask for this grace wholeheartedly, it is important for us to know how desperately we are in need of it. Psychology has shown that many of our true feelings and motivations are genuinely hidden from us. The unconscious part of ourselves can have a powerful influence on what we feel and how we act. Even apart from this, there is a natural tendency to rationalize our actions and to believe the sort of front we put on for other people. Or we can deny or repress unpleasant or embarrassing things about ourselves. Or we can have attitudes of self-deprecation or contempt that distort our view of ourselves and others.

The possibilities for self-deception are endless. To truly know ourselves is not something that we are able to do alone. We need to ask the Holy Spirit for the light that can reveal us to ourselves.

"The third point is to demand an account of my soul from the moment of rising to that of the present examination, hour by hour or period by period. The thoughts should be examined first, then the words, and finally the actions."

The third point is the heart of the *Examen*. Our actions, words, thoughts, feelings can come from an internal source of freedom and openness to other people and God. Or they can come from what St. Paul calls the "flesh" or the "law of sin"; that is to say from the self-centredness that inhabits all of us. We examine the events of our day methodically in order

Praying the Examen

Thanksgiving

Lord, I realize that all, even myself, is a gift from you.

Today, for what things am I most grateful?

Intention

Lord, open my eyes and ears to be more honest with myself.

Help me to look honestly at myself and what I need and desire.

Examination

Lord, show me what has been happening to me and in me this day.

Today, in what ways have I experienced your love?

Contrition

Lord, I am still learning to grow in your love.

*Today, what choices have been inadequate responses to your love?
What have I done wrong?*

Hope and Help

Lord, let me look with longing toward the future.

Today and tomorrow, in what ways do I need your grace and your help?

Conclude with the Lord's Prayer

to uncover the source and the direction of our life that day.

Ignatius suggests we move from thoughts to words to actions. However, it can be more fruitful to move the other way, to look at words and actions and then reflect on the real motivations, intentions and feelings that underlay them. Actions that are apparently good can be done for bad motives, such as a desire for praise. Such an action might be considered praiseworthy but really springs from self-centredness.

Some people are free from actions that are obviously sinful. But when we go to a deeper level of intention and feeling, we can discover that sin has a larger hold on our life than we suspect, that there are all sorts of subtle ways that we focus on self rather than moving outward, towards others and towards the Other.

The Christian life aims at a purity of intention, where all our actions spring from freedom and grace. At first we achieve this type of freedom only sporadically and often fall short. But we can grow towards it.

The examination of our day is not simply earnest introspection, it is prayer. It is going through our day with God, attentive to the inner feelings and desires which is where we experience God's call in the midst of everyday activity.

"The fourth point is to ask pardon of God our Lord for my faults."

Once we have reviewed our day, we may have come to a sense of the dynamic of sin and grace that has been operating in our life that day. The fourth point is our response to that awareness.

Insofar as we have discovered grace and freedom operative during the day, our response is gratitude and wonder for the work of God in our soul. Genuine freedom always comes as a surprise to us, because it involves a sort of self-transcendence that we know we don't have in ourselves. When we discover that in our day, we need to praise God for it.

Conversely, when we discover sinfulness and self-centredness, our response is remorse and contrition. Contrition does not mean dwelling in guilt and shame and beating ourselves for not being perfect. It means recognizing our distance from God, our moving away from God, and asking for and receiving God's forgiveness. The difference between contrition and shame is that contrition is a feeling that moves us out of ourselves and towards God. Shame simply moves us deeper into ourselves.

Like gratitude in the first point, we may not be able to deeply feel the contrition that is the proper response to recognition of our self-centredness. But it is important then to express it, even if it doesn't seem very deep, by asking for pardon.

"The fifth point is to resolve to amend with the help of God's grace. Close with the Lord's Prayer."

We end the *Examen* by looking towards tomorrow with the desire and resolve to effect changes in action or attitude that God has called us to today.

Alcoholics Anonymous has a slogan, "One Day at a Time" by which they mean that sobriety is not achieved by big and noble resolutions, but by trying to stay sober for one day.

It can be useful to look at our spiritual life in that way. We deal with it one day at a time. In this fifth point we don't look at changing our whole lives, we simply look at what we want to change tomorrow, and ask God's help for it. Our lives are a drama of sin and grace. But this drama is being played out on the rather humble stage of our day to day life.

Ignatius adds our need for God's grace, an important point. We are not resolving to perfect ourselves by force of our own will. We are resolving to open ourselves to grace through awareness of where we need it.

Other thoughts on ways to incorporate / why pray the Examen:

From Dorothy Day in *The Duty of Delight*:

1. Thank God for favors.
2. Beg for light (the grace to see clearly)
3. Survey
4. Repent
5. Resolve

From Dennis Hamm, SJ in *Rummaging Through the Day for God, America, 1994*:

Here some of the consequences flowing from this kind of prayer:

1. There is always something to pray about. For a person who does this kind of prayer at least once a day, there is never the question: What should I talk to God about? Until you die, you always have a past 24 hours, and you always have some feelings about what's next.
2. The gratitude moment is worthwhile in itself. "Dedicate yourselves to gratitude," Paul tells the Colossians. Even if we drift off into slumber after reviewing the gifts of the day, we have praised the Lord.
3. We learn to face the Lord where we are, as we are. There is no other way to be present to God, of course, we often fool ourselves into thinking that we have to "put on our best face" before we address our God.
4. We learn to respect our feelings. Feelings count. They are morally neutral until we make some choice about acting upon or dealing with them. But if we don't attend to them, we miss what they have to tell us about the quality of our lives.
5. Praying from feelings, we are liberated from them. An unattended emotion can dominate and manipulate us. Attending to and praying from and about the persons and situations that give rise to the emotions helps us to cease being unwitting slaves of our emotions.

6. We actually find something to bring to confession. That is, we stumble across our sins without making them the primary focus.
7. We can experience an inner healing. People have found that praying about (as opposed to fretting about or denying) feelings leads to a healing of mental life. We probably get a head start on our dreamwork when we do this.
8. This kind of prayer helps us get over our Deism. Deism is belief in a sort of "clock-maker" God, a God who does indeed exist but does not have much, if anything, to do with his people's ongoing life. The God we have come to know through our Jewish and Christian experience is more present than we usually think.
9. Praying this way is an antidote to the spiritual disease of Pelagianism. Pelagianism was the heresy that approached life with God as a do-it-yourself project ("If at first you don't succeed..."), whereas a true theology of grace and freedom sees life as response to God's love ("If today you hear God's voice...").

A final thought. How can anyone dare to say that paying attention to felt experience is a listening to the voice of God? On the face of it, it does sound like a dangerous presumption. But, notice, I am not equating memory with the voice of God. I am saying that, if we are to listen for the God who creates and sustains us, we need to take seriously and prayerfully the meeting between the creatures we are and all else that God holds lovingly in existence. That "interface" is the felt experience of my day. It deserves prayerful attention. It is a big part of how we know and respond to God.

From James Martin, SJ in *The Jesuit Guide to Almost Everything*:

p. 98-99

The examen helps you see God in retrospect. (Quoting Fr. Kolvenbach, SJ) "In this sense, it is less a matter of searching for God than of allowing oneself to be found by Him in all of life's situations, where he does not cease to pass and where He allows Himself to be recognized once He has really passed."

Likewise, while we frequently ask God for help in specific areas of life, we just as frequently fail to recognize God's help when it comes. Sometimes the examen can help answer the question, "Why doesn't God answer my prayer?" ...The examen helps you notice that God often works gradually.... With the examen you're less likely to overlook that slow work of God.

Finding God in your examen makes you more likely to look for him during the day. You become more aware of where God was and where God is. Gradually you realize that God is active every moment of the day. Finding God by looking behind you makes it easier to see God right in front of you.