

Prayer of the Examen

The examination of consciousness

The prayer of the examen, or examination of consciousness, is a practice intended to bring us into a deeper awareness of God's presence and guidance in our ordinary day. It highlights God's concern with our whole lives: the big events and small, our thoughts and emotions, what we do to others and what is done to us. The Examen recognizes God is present at all times and invites us into deeper relationship as we live and move in the kingdom of God.

The Examen is a simple prayer pattern of reviewing our day with God. There are various questions we can ask to facilitate this reflection, but at its heart, the Examen is like a rearview mirror, helping us to recognize the presence and activity of God in our lives. A faithful practice of the Examen will cultivate a deeper awareness of God's consistent presence and voice.

This practice differs from an examination of conscience, which is a reflection on sin. While it may lead us to confession, the Examen has a broader focus. It is an examination of our consciousness; when were we conscious of God's presence, God's voice, or God's activity in our day? It is a detailed reflection on the presence and movement of God in our ordinary lives.

The prayer of the Examen not only helps us identify God's presence in our lives but also helps discern his leading. Ignatius of Loyola taught that recognizing God's presence should lead us to act accordingly, so the result of the Examen is God's active direction in our lives. We should practice the Examen with an intent to be what Ignatius calls "contemplatives in action."

O Lord, you have searched me and known me. You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away. You search out my path and my lying down and are acquainted with all my ways.

Psalm 139:1-2

Teach me to do your will, for you are my God. Let your good spirit lead me on a level path.

Psalm 143:10

God our Lord would have us look to the Giver and love Him more than His gift, keeping Him always before our eyes, in our hearts, and in our thoughts.

St. Ignatius of Loyola

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy. My soul clings to you; your right hand upholds me.

Psalm 63:5-8

Resources

Rummaging for God: Praying Backward Through Your Day by Dennis Hamm, SJ

Consciousness Examen by George Aschenbrenner, SJ

The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today by Timothy Gallagher, OVM

The Examen an audio resource from A New Liturgy (anewliturgy.com)

Praying the Examen

Become aware of and rest in the presence of God.

Take a breath. Remember that God is always present. God is in and around us. Take another breath. Breathe in the presence of God. Pay attention to your breath if it helps. Trust in the presence of God. Rest in it. Don't rush through the opening of the examen. God is with you. He loves you right where you are. Take another breath and just be.

Review the day with gratitude.

Think about the last twenty-four hours. For what are you thankful? What gifts has God given you? Think through the last day and pause to give thanks to God for each gift.

Review the day in God's presence.

Reflect on the specific events of the day hour by hour. Pay attention to your emotions along the way. When did you feel a strong sense of love? What made you angry? Did you experience a deep sense of joy? What about excitement? What scared you? When did you feel sad?

Engage your emotions. Where is God in the emotion? Remember God is with you. If it helps, imagine Jesus is seated with you.

Respond to God's invitation.

Choose one emotion, moment, or experience that stands out. Is there one you sense God is inviting you to explore more intentionally? Is one shouting for your attention, or is there one you are particularly anxious to engage?

Talk to God about the one you choose. What do you want to ask or tell God about it? What is God saying? As best as you are able, have a conversation with God. Speak and listen. If you find it hard to listen, that is okay. Tell God whatever is on your mind. If you find it hard to talk to God, you might also choose to sit in silence, knowing that God is with you even in the quiet.

Look forward.

Look forward to the next twenty-four hours. What are you anticipating in the coming day? What feelings surface? Where do you need to be especially aware of God's presence? Do you sense God inviting you to do anything specific? Pray for your day to come.

Questions to Guide the Examen

Examining our emotions

When did I feel strong emotions today? When did I experience joy? When was I angry? What scared me? When was I sad? When did I feel love?

Examining God's presence

When did I sense God's presence? When did God feel absent?

Examining God's direction

When did I move toward God? When did I move away from God?

Examining God's voice

How did God speak to me today? When did God seem silent?

Examining our thoughts

What did I think about today? What thoughts were pleasing to God? What thoughts were not?