

▲ SESSION 3 HANDOUT:

Contemplative Prayer of Examen

Examen is a contemplative prayer of self-examination, reflecting on the day in the midst of God's presence. The practice of examen, or self-examination, is intended to foster greater awareness of God's love and presence in our lives and our world.

While the development of this spiritual practice is often attributed to Saint Ignatius of Loyola in the 16th Century and faithfully practiced by the Jesuits, we see this practice in the life of King David who provides in some sense a template for this contemplative prayer in his petition to God in the close of Psalm 139 where he writes in verses 23-24:

Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any grievous way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting!

The examen traditionally consists of five steps (or movements) adapted from Saint Ignatius:

- Acknowledge an awareness of God's presence.
- Review the day in a posture of gratitude.
- Recognize a "Consolation" and a "Desolation" from the day.
- Choose a "Desolation" to pray into.
- Look with hope for new tomorrow.

A **consolation** is an experience that causes you to feel fully alive, at peace, joyful, happy, comforted, whole, connected, your best self, etc. and could be understood as an experience in which you feel close God.

A **desolation** is an experience that causes you to feel drained of energy, frustrated, irritated, angry, sad, sorrowful, alone, isolated, unaccepted, fragmented, less than your best self, etc. and could be understood as an experience in which you feel far away from God. Even though this aspect can at times feel uncomfortable and sometimes distressing experience and we may feel as if God is far away, God is still very near.

While it is often easier to "experience" God in consolation, it is important to recognize that God is also present in desolation. We are prone, however, to move away from God in desolation. Ruth Haley Barton writes that "approaches to [spiritual] formation that focus only on those places where we are fairly well along can actually become a defense mechanism for avoiding awareness of those areas that are not yet formed in the image of Christ." (I2J, 52)

We will be adapting this structure to the examen over the course of the next two months by ending each day with the following steps (that we are free to adapt):

- Begin with two minutes of silence, placing yourself in God's presence, clearing your mind, quieting the noise, and focusing your attention and affection on God, knowing that God is present with you.
- Read through Psalm 139:23-24 (or the psalm in its entirety on occasion)
- Spend approximately five minutes reflecting on the past day, replaying your day as a movie in your mind, reflecting on all that took place: the activities, conversations, and interactions with others; your thoughts, emotions, and feelings.
- Acknowledge one consolation from your day and give thanks to God for this blessing in your life.
- Acknowledge one desolation from your day, asking the Holy Spirit to reveal "where you fell short of God's created purpose for you to be a compassionate person 'whose relationships are characterized by love and forgiveness, persons whose lives are a healing, liberating, transforming touch of God's grace upon their world'", remembering "the great promise of the Christian life...that 'God is there, in grace, offering the forgiveness, the cleansing, the liberation, the healing we need to begin the journey toward wholeness and fulfillment in Christ.'" (I2J, 53)
- Close by reminding yourself of who God is: that He is sovereign and faithful; and that our hope rests not in our works, but in Christ's perfect work. And then rest in that peace throughout the night.

If you find that you are unable to conduct this practice at the close of the day, experiment with adapting this as a morning prayer, replaying the events of the prior day.

LAST UPDATED: *Thursday, May 19, 2022*