

Examen

Overview

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)

Examen Guide

1. Positioning

Position yourself before God, “as a stone before a carver” as Brother Lawrence wrote by spending a couple of minutes in silence with God - closing your eyes, calming your body, quieting the noise, focusing your attention and affection on God - knowing His presence is with you. Begin your time of positioning praying this breath prayer, “Here I am, Lord. Here I am.”

2. Inviting

Invite God to examine your heart by reading Psalm 139:23-24 (or by reading the psalm in its entirety):
*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!*

3. Revealing

Spend a few minutes replaying the events of the day, like a movie playing in your mind, asking God to reveal all that took place, reflecting on what you did, where you went, and who you were with - reflecting on what you thought and said - how you felt and why you felt that way. Also ask God to reveal any unrecognized or unrepentant sin in your life.

4. Repenting

There, in His presence, aware of His knowledge of you, secure in His love for you - confess your sin to God, repenting of your sin, and turning to God - knowing Christ took on your sin and has forgiven you of your sin - receiving this free gift of grace from God.

5. Thanking

Take one moment of consolation from your day - a moment when you felt fully alive and at peace - happy and filled with joy - safe and secure - fully aware of God’s presence with you - and with a heart of gratitude give thanks to God, thanking Him for His presence with you in that moment.

6. Remembering

Take one moment of desolation from your day - a movement when you felt anger and frustration - sorrow and grief - when you felt lost in the wilderness or alone in the darkness - isolated, rejected, and unaccepted - and remember God’s constant presence with you. Even there, in the darkness and in the wilderness, God was with you.

7. Closing

Repeat these three reminders from Psalm 139 of who God is and what that means for you:

- Because God is omniscient, knowing everything about me: I am known by God
- Because God is omnipresent, being everywhere with me: I am not alone
- Because God is omnificient, having created me: I am loved by God