

Prayer of Examen

The Prayer of Examen is a daily spiritual exercise developed by St. Ignatius Loyola. The formalized practice of this discipline dates back to the 16th century but grows out of the words and intentions recorded in Psalm 139:23-24, where the Psalmist says, "Search me, O God, and know my heart, test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any hurtful way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

The Prayer of Examen involves reviewing your day using a variety of questions. These questions are designed to help you discern God's presence in the circumstances and people you encounter. In addition, the questions help you to discern your negative and positive responses to God's Spirit. Here are some helpful questions that will lead you to personal reflection and discovery:

- † Where is God in this situation?
- † How is God leading me?
- † What is God saying to me?
- † How was God there for me in this experience?
- † What in my present situation is leading me to love God and love others?
- † What is leading me toward God?
- † What is leading me away from God?
- † What is the underlying spirit in my dealing with others?
- † When was I aware of God during my day?
- † When was I not aware of God during my day?

The Prayer of Examen, when used regularly, keeps you from merely floating through your spiritual life, being carried by the currents of the river of your experience and world, unaware of where it is taking you. Through this prayer you become aware of a variety of currents in your life, seeking to intentionally place yourself in the current that is of God and is taking you to God.

There are five simple steps to the Examen, which should take 10-15 minutes to complete, and what follows is just one interpretation of these five steps in discerning the movement of God's Spirit in your day. Through this method of praying you can grow in a sense of self and the Source of self; you can become more sensitive to your own spirit with its longings, its powers, its Source; you will develop an openness to receive the gifts that God offers.

Before you start: Try to be in a place where you are least likely to be disturbed, and where there is the least amount of external noise. Perhaps you might light a

candle or change the lighting when you pray to symbolize the start of this activity. Sit comfortably and still yourself; relax, be aware of your breathing, your body and how you are feeling.

1. Recall that you are in the presence of God. No matter where you are, hilltop or valley, country or city, in a crowd or alone, you are a creature in the midst of creation. As you quiet yourself, become aware that God is present within you, in the creation that surrounds you, in your body, in those around you. The Creator who brought you forth into being is concerned for you. The Spirit of God, sent by Christ, will remind you that you are gifted to help bring creation to its fullness. Ask the Holy Spirit to let you look on all you see with love.

2. Recall your day with gratitude. Be concrete and let special moments or pleasures spring to mind. Recall the smell of your morning coffee, the taste of something good that you ate, the laugh of a child, the fragrance of a flower, the smile brought forth by a kind word, a lesson that you learned. Take stock of what you received and what you gave. Give thanks to God for these things. Also look at your permanent gifts that allow your participation in this day. Recall your particular strengths in times of difficulty, your ability to hope in times of weakness, your sense of humor and your life of faith, your intelligence and health, your family and friends. God gives you these to draw you into the fullness of life. As you move through the details of your day, give thanks for God's presence in the big and the small things of your life.

3. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you look at your actions and attitudes and motives with honesty and patience. "When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth." (John 16:13) The Holy Spirit inspires you to see with growing freedom the development of your life story. The Spirit gives a freedom to look upon yourself without condemnation and without complacency and thus be open to growth. Ask that you will learn and grow as you reflect, thus deepening your knowledge of self and your relationship with God.

4. Review your day. This is the longest of the steps. Recall the events of your day; explore the context of your actions. Review your hopes and hesitations. Many situations will show that your heart was divided—wavering between helping and disregarding, scoffing and encouraging, listening and ignoring, rebuking and forgiving, speaking and silence, neglecting and thanking. Remember, this is not a time to dwell on your shortcomings; rather, it is a gentle look at how you have responded to God's gifts. It is an opportunity for growth of self and

deepening your relationship with God. Notice where you acted freely—picking a particular course of action from the possibilities you saw. See where you were swept along without freedom. What reactions helped or hindered you? See where Christ entered your decisions and where you might have paused to receive His influence. "Test yourselves," St. Paul urges, "to see whether you are living in faith; examine yourselves. Perhaps you yourselves do not realize that Christ Jesus is in you." (2 Cor.) As you daily and prayerfully explore the mystery of yourself in the midst of your actions you will grow more familiar with your own spirit and become more aware of the promptings of God's Spirit within you. Allow God to speak, challenge, encourage and teach you. Thus you will come to know that Christ is with you. Christ will continually invite you to love your neighbor as yourself and strengthen you to do this.

5. Reconcile and Resolve. Finally, picture yourself seated next to Jesus, talking as you would with a friend. Share your thoughts about your actions, attitudes, feelings and interactions. Perhaps during this time you may feel led to seek forgiveness, ask for direction, share a concern, or express gratitude. Give thanks for God's grace and resolve with Jesus to move forward in action where appropriate. You might like to finish your time with the Lords Prayer.