

The Examen

What Is the Examen?

The Examen is a daily prayer of consciousness, of “finding God in all things,” in growing as a contemplative in action. It is a prayer of gratitude, an invitation to discover God’s loving action and blessings in our daily life.

The Examen is a prayer of graced awareness, reflecting upon encountering God’s presence and action in our everyday lives: to see the day as it was through the eyes of Christ; to discern the Holy Spirit’s leading direction for us; and to respond to the Father’s loving invitation for renewal and rejoicing (KSW).

The Examen is a prayer of daily reflection developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola over 500 years ago. It can help us see God’s hand in our daily lived experience.

“Experience alone does not teach us much; it is when we reflect on our experience that we begin to learn and grow in awareness of God’s ongoing activity in our life. It’s a simple yet profound prayer of discernment that can transform our lives of desiring and growing in holiness day by day in ‘finding God in all things’” (Jesuits of South Africa).

The Examen is a window of time for prayer, where we reflect upon how we encountered others in God in the everyday. It is a simple daily prayer with God, who offers us gifts of transforming grace. It is also called the Prayer of Consciousness or the Prayer of Reflection, in which we take a journey into the recent past, savor the present, and look with hope toward the future (KSW).

It is for us to notice more of God’s activity in our daily life, to grow in virtue and holiness day by day, and to know ourselves.

The Meaning of “Examen”

“Examen” comes from the Latin word that means both an examination and an active weighing or judging of something. It’s as old as Socrates’ instruction to “know thyself.”

It’s a practice of regular self-scrutiny. Ignatius took this ancient tradition of prayerful reflection and made a way to experience God, as well as to assess our behavior.

What the Examen Is Not

The Examen is not a liturgical prayer, devotional prayer, intercession, or prayer with Scripture. It’s not contemplation or centering prayer, which involves emptying our minds of images, words, or ideas. The Examen is the kind of prayer that lives in our hearts, directed to God, who does not stand apart from our lives. Each moment offers a window into where God has been in our day.

To See All Things New in Christ

Where we come to:

- Notice
- Listen
- Savor
- Discern
- Commit
- Adore

We take a journey into the recent past, savor the present, and look with hope toward the future.

A daily prayer of gratitude that has the capacity to transform our lives:

- To grow in virtue and holiness day by day
- To come to know ourselves

The Examen as a Fullness of Prayer: ACTS

- **Adoration** — Begin by looking at God looking at us. The gaze of love is adoration.
- **Consolation and Contrition** — Collect the day, savoring the graces, blessings, and mercy.
- **Thanksgiving** — Respond in gratitude for our life and all His gifts of the day.
- **Supplication, Sitting, Silence** — Petition and union.

Where do we need help with the commitments that flow from what He revealed to us, and what do we need for tomorrow? Sitting in silence circles us back to adoration, naturally flowing into a unitive contemplative state to be a “contemplative in action.”

The Examen as Contemplatives in Action

All Are New in Christ: putting on the eyes and mind of Christ.

- What we think is what we do and feel.
- What we feel is what we think and do.
- What we do is what we think and feel.

To desire to be contemplatives in action for the greater glory of God.

The Examen is the kind of prayer that lives in our hearts, directed to God, who does not stand apart from our lives.

In Praying the Examen We Seek

- **Grace** — to see through God’s eyes
- **Knowledge** — to know what God wants for us
- **Desire** — to discover our deepest desires, which God places in our hearts
- **Freedom** — to be freed from our inordinate and disordered attachments that pull us away from God

Notes on the Examen

Desires

Ignatius saw how God loved desires. He had an optimistic view of our human personality. We are continually to pray for our deepest desires; “our greatest desires” are for a loving union with God and others. This is the deepest truth about ourselves and the fundamental forces within us. Ignatius wanted to help people develop a reflective habit of mind that is constantly attuned to God’s presence and responsive to God’s leading. It became the foundation for receiving a graced awareness.

1. Dispose Yourself to Be Attentive to God’s Presence

God is always present with and in us, paying detailed attention to us, waiting for us. Yet we do not consciously sense or feel His presence all the time or often notice His actions in our lives. In soul and body, spiritually and physically, we live in, in touch with, and tethered to God always. Yet mentally we are distracted, and at times our hearts and wills are not directed toward the most loving actions or thoughts. God is patiently waiting for our attention, always there, desiring to help.

Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, [then] I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me. (Rev 3:20)

Settling in. Letting God know we are attentive and ready.

We settle our bodies, minds, and hearts, intending to direct the totality of our attention toward God... then open the door... “Here I am, Lord.” We place ourselves into God’s loving hands as we enter this moment in gratitude.

We may be anxious, tired, fearful of reviewing the day, or not wanting to think; whatever condition we are in emotionally, spiritually, or physically, we ask for the grace to be with God honestly and without distractions.

2. Gratitude

Saint Ignatius was caught up in a vision of God the Giver of an endless stream of gifts. He saw God as a generous Giver of gifts.

The hallmark of Ignatian spirituality is gratitude, a distinguishing characteristic... it is a spirit of gratitude for all things. Gratitude is the key to this spirituality; it is both the context of prayer and the secret that explains everything. Gratitude is the foundation of our relationship with God. We walk through our day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights.

St. Paul wrote: “Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. In all circumstances give thanks...” (1 Thessalonians 5:16–18).

3. Ask for Guidance

This is a prayer where we invite God, who is already present, to guide us. We ask God for the grace to look at our day as it was—“what is”—not what we wanted it to be or hoped it would have been. We ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten us at this time, for clarity and understanding. We ask God to bring clarity and understanding.

God’s perspective is different. We want Holy Spirit–guided insight, not insight dependent upon our natural powers of memory; yet God works through our natural processes. Our memory is fallible, unpredictable, and unclear. We are called to trust in the Holy Spirit to guide our imperfect abilities. We ask to see our lives through God’s eyes, not our own. We ask God to show us what we cannot do ourselves.

God shares in the quiet whispers of our Spirit-guided memories, thoughts, and feelings. We are asking God to bring into the light what He wants to show us. We pray for the light of truth of the Holy Spirit.

“When he comes, the Spirit of truth, he will guide you to all truth.” (John 16:13)

4. Review the Day

Beginning with when you woke up, move through the different moments of your day. Take note of who you spoke with, what you saw, and what happened. Pay attention to small things—the food you ate, the sights you saw, and other seemingly small pleasures. God is in the details. Each moment offers a window into where God has been in your day.

Walk through your day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights. Focus on the day’s gifts. Look at the work you did, the people you interacted with. What did you receive from these people? What did you give them?

Pay special attention to your feelings throughout this process; Ignatius considered them the “spiritual barometer” of how one is doing. Don’t censor or begin to analyze the feelings; just note them as they float freely to the surface.

Ways to review the day

1. Sequence — hour by hour
2. Take one feeling
3. Rummaging — look for things that may pop up
4. Categories — gifts
5. Relationships

Two Ways of Being Real

In praying the Examen, we are looking at two ways of “being real.”

First, the subject of our prayer time is the concrete reality of our everyday life: what happened.

Second is the reality beneath that reality: what were our feelings, dispositions, and reactions, and how we responded toward God’s presence and actions during the time frame we are reflecting upon.

Reflection

Reflection is a time to gain new insights from the Holy Spirit and seek answers to help us in our growing edges. We ask the Holy Spirit to direct us to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important.

We notice where we moved closer to God, where we were more loving. Noticing where we were less loving reminds us to practice the virtue of humility. We notice where we felt resistance. This noticing can be God’s invitation to grow. We have feelings; we become aware of them, recognize them, then ask with our reason what they mean in God.

Remember, we are not doing any of this under our own steam, because God has invited us to do this and the Holy Spirit is guiding us every step of the way. We are doing it because we are in a personal, loving relationship with God, and He has invited us to look and reflect. Remember, God loves us more than we can ever love ourselves.

5. Hope

We have reviewed the day, searched for God’s activity, reflected upon our actions and the reasons behind them, waited for the prompting of the Holy Spirit to enlighten us, kept mindful of our thoughts and feelings during this prayer time, and discerned the direction we were going.

In this phase we look to amend where we have failed to move in the more loving way. St. Ignatius saw sin as failure: failure to be grateful for the blessings, failure to respond to God, and failure to show love to another through our actions.

We ask: Where do we need God most tomorrow? What are we concerned about? What is our desire for tomorrow?

We look forward to the future with a hopeful resolution for the many blessings we will receive, and ask for the grace to carry out that resolve in the new opportunities God will bring.

We end with a personal conversation with God, sharing our concerns, joys, and needs in grateful awareness of His love for us.

To Pray the Examen

The Examen's Three Simple Questions

1. What happened today?
2. Where was God?
3. Where was I, how did I respond?

In the Examen, we gratefully gather in all the graces we received during the day to view how we acted with the gift of graces.

Five Movements

- **Gratitude** — Thanksgiving for the day's graces and gifts.
- **Desire** — For the Holy Spirit to reveal the day through Christ's eyes and for what He most wants you to take note of.
- **Review** — Who and what did you encounter? Discern the Holy Spirit's leading. How did you respond?
- **Reflect** — Share your thoughts and feelings about what came up. Listen for the Spirit's guidance. Commit to taking action.
- **Request** — Share your concerns about tomorrow, and ask specifically for what you need.

How To

1. Offer thanksgiving for the day.
2. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the day through God's eyes and for what is most important to take note of.
3. Review and reflect. Share your thoughts and feelings about what comes up.
4. Ask for help to know what God would want for you.
5. Share your concerns about tomorrow, and ask specifically for what you need.

Practical Notes for the Examen

- Allow God to show you the day. Let Him bring up what He wants to show you.
- Review the section on what consolation and desolation feel like and Rule #2 of the discernment of spirits.
- Listen for the prompts within your intellect, will, and affect—those interior movements.
- Review your thoughts, feelings, and actions through God’s eyes. Or do the reverse: your behaviors and actions, then feelings, then thoughts.
- Question: Were your head, heart, and hands aligned?
- Remember, not all thoughts are your own; what you pay attention to and move with is what counts.
- It is best to do this when you are not tired, for physical desolation can lead to a false spiritual desolation.
- Depending on whether you are a night person or a morning person, you may reflect on the recent past in your early evening prayer time, as part of your night prayers, or as part of your morning offering.

Examples of Different Variations

Our God of Surprises: An Ignatian Examen

1. **Gratitude** — I begin in awareness of God’s presence in me and around me, and in gratitude for the gifts I have received this day.
2. **Review** — I ask God to help me see one or two surprises I encountered this day, big or small, positive or negative.
3. **Response** — In my prayerful imagination, I revisit these surprises and reflect on my response to each. I give thanks for those responses that were from God’s inspiration and ask forgiveness for those that were not.
4. **Desire** — Looking to tomorrow, I ask God for accompaniment in the surprises I encounter and help in responding to them in a life-giving way.
5. **Hope** — I attend to what my heart and soul are feeling, and I conclude by asking the God of surprises for light and hope.

The Examen: A Daily Review of Finding God in Feelings

1. Call to mind something or someone for whom you are grateful. Say a simple prayer of gratitude.
2. Invite the Holy Spirit into your memory for guidance. Call to mind the events of the day.
3. Notice when you felt happiest, felt loved, and connected. Say a prayer of thanksgiving.
4. Notice when you felt saddest, unloved, disconnected. Ask for whatever is needed to bring healing and/or forgiveness to those moments.
5. Set a simple goal for yourself based on what you noticed. What might you do or omit to make you a more loving person tomorrow?

The Examen: Brief Version

1. Give thanksgiving for the day.
2. Ask the Holy Spirit to reveal the day through God's eyes, and what is most important to take note of.
3. Review and reflect. Share your thoughts and feelings about what comes up.
4. Ask for help to know what God would want for you.
5. Share your concerns about tomorrow, and ask specifically for what you need.

Here I Am, Lord: Show Me

Preparation

1. **Gratitude** — Thankfulness from the heart for the time.
2. **Enlightenment** — Ask God to show you your day through Christ's eyes.
3. **Review** — Let the day's events come to you.
4. **Reflect** — What do you sense God is showing you, based upon your experience in reviewing the day?
 - What seemed to be most important?
 - What insights did you learn?
 - What is God asking of you to do based upon what you reviewed?
 - Commit to following through the best you can.
5. **Hope** — What are you concerned about for tomorrow? Ask God to help you.

Ending: Thankfulness from the heart for the time and help.

The Examen of Consciousness

The Murphy Center for Ignatian Spirituality, Fairfield University

1. **Thanksgiving** — Lord, I realize that all, even myself, is a gift from you. Today, for what things am I most grateful?
2. **Illumination** — Lord, open my eyes and ears to be more honest with myself. Today, what do I really want for myself?
3. **Examination** — Lord, show me what has been happening to me and in me this day. Today, in what ways have I experienced your love?
4. **Contrition** — Lord, I am still learning to grow in your love. Today, what choices have been inadequate responses to your love?
5. **Hope** — Lord, let me look with faith and hope toward the future. Today, how will I let you lead me to a brighter tomorrow?

For a Retreat: Reflection as Self-Knowledge

Jesuit Institute South Africa

Experience alone does not teach us much; it is when we reflect on our experience that we begin to learn and grow in awareness of God’s ongoing activity in our life. It’s a simple yet profound prayer of discernment that can transform our lives of desiring and growing in holiness day by day in ‘finding God in all things.’

Preparation: Settling In. Let God Know You Are There.

Settle yourself to direct your attention toward God. Find a place of quiet and comfort. Imagine placing yourself into God’s loving hands, thus letting Him know you are there, just the two of you together.

“Here I am, Lord.”

1. Ask for God’s Assistance

Whatever condition you are in—tired, concerned, overwhelmed, rushed—ask for the grace to be there without distractions.

- Ask God to help you be honest as you look back on your day.
- Ask God to show you the day through His eyes.

Request for help: _____

2. Review and Give Thanks for the Gifts of the Day

For Ignatius, the first and most important step in any spiritual journey is gratitude. So look first to remember and to name the blessings.

Let the day wash over you.

- Look at the day, look at the work you did, look at the people you interacted with. What did you receive from them? What did you give them?
- Pay attention to small things and other seemingly small pleasures. God is in the details.
- Notice any joys and delights, and focus on the day's gifts... be specific.

Savor what God shows you.

What were the blessings today? _____

3. Review the Day Again: To Reflect, To Take Notice

God communicates not only through insights and thoughts (such as in reading Scripture) but also through your feelings, emotions, desires, attractions, repulsions, and moods, all of which are called “interior movements.” Remember, feelings are neither positive nor negative; it is what you do with them that raises moral questions. These “movements” tell you about the direction your life is going.

Notice moments when you felt more fully alive, more at peace, joyful, happy, comforted, whole, or your best self, and moments when you felt closer to God. Allow some of these moments to come to mind. These are times of consolation.

- Pick a moment that you now feel most grateful for and stay with it; savor it. Notice how God is drawing you to more of those experiences. Take some time to give thanks to God.

Now, remember anything that you are less grateful for, or experiences that caused you to feel drained of energy, frustrated, irritated, upset, sad, alone, isolated, distressed, or less than your best self.

- Bring these memories before God; ask God to bring you the healing you need.

Pick one strong thought or feeling and ask God to help you understand where it came from and where it was leading you.

What was your strongest thought or feeling today? _____

Where was it leading you? Toward God? Away from God?

4. Ask for Direction

Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important.

- It may involve a feeling, positive or negative.
- It may be an encounter with someone, or a moment of delight, or a sense of peace.
- Or it may seem to be something rather insignificant.

What is God asking of you in this one aspect of the day? _____

5. Look Forward to Tomorrow with Hope

Ask God for the grace to be with you tomorrow. Pay attention to the feelings that surface as you survey what is coming up.

Are you doubtful, cheerful, apprehensive, full of delight or anticipation? _____

What do you think you particularly need for tomorrow: strength, energy, patience, courage? _____

Ask for that gift of grace.

What do you need God's help with? _____

Closing

End with a closing prayer: the Glory Be, and close with the Sign of the Cross, or another prayer.

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