

PRAYER OF EXAMEN

The prayer of Examen is a way of assessing one's life before God on a regular basis. This prayer was first developed by Ignatius of Loyola in *The Spiritual Exercises*. He urged all the members of his society to use this prayer daily, even when the necessities of travel, work, and ministry made other forms of prayer impossible. Ignatius took for granted that God is always present and at work. . The spiritual challenge according to him is to recognize how God is working and respond in gratitude and openness.

The practice of this prayer contains the assumption that you have a desire and commitment to develop a growing awareness of God's presence and leading in your life.

The purpose of this prayer is to help us to process each day before God. The Examen carves out a few moments of solitude in the midst of a busy day to allow us to reflect on what is going on and where our actions and choices are taking us. It is a form of discernment, because it enables us to look concretely at events and ask:

- Where is God in this situation? How is God leading me? What is God saying to me?
- How was God there for me in *that* experience?
- What in my present situation is leading me to God and others in love? What is leading me away?
- What is the underlying spirit in my dealing with others?
- What is really going on in what's happening in my life these days?

The whole point of this self-examination is to become more God centered by observing the moments when we are and are not God centered.

In practicing the Examen, we are consciously taking the time, usually at the end of the day, to take inventory of the presence and activity of God in our lives. In doing so, we can become aware of the often subtle and unnoticed movements of God's Spirit in our lives. We can begin to notice what brings us life, and what drains us of life. Ignatius referred to these as consolations and desolations. We become aware of where we have responded in obedience to God, and also where we have resisted and turned away. In response to both these realities, we can express both gratitude and confession. As we come to see and name our own weaknesses and struggles we will become more aware of God's continual grace to us and God's transforming power with us. This will have the additional benefit of helping us to be more gracious and less judging

toward others. This prayer practice can become an important avenue for helping us to find God in the midst of our busy lives.

Richard Foster describes the Prayer of Examen as follows:

It has two basic aspects, like two sides of a door. The first is an *examen of consciousness* through which we discover how God has been present to us throughout the day and how we have responded to his loving presence. The second aspect is an *examen of conscience* in which we uncover those areas that need cleansing, purifying, and healing.¹

What the Prayer Looks Like

At the end of each day, prayerfully reflect on the internal and external events and experiences of your life using any of the following sets of questions,

- For what moment today am I most grateful?
- For what moment today am I least grateful?

- What was today's high point?
- What was today's low point?

- What was it today that was most life giving?
- What was it today that was most life draining?

- When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, and God?
- When did I have the least sense of belonging today?

- When did I sense connection with God?
- When did I sense a disconnect with God?

- When did I give and receive the most love today?
- When did I give and receive the least love today?

- When was I happiest today?
- When was I saddest?

The prayer of Examen asks us to focus our recollection on the previous twenty-four hours. This might seem easier than it actually is. We often find that most of our days go by unnoticed. They just happen, and before we know

¹ Richard Foster, *Prayer*, 27-28.

it, we find ourselves falling into our bed exhausted. We tend to move through a day almost by rote unless something stops us and makes us take notice. This prayer is one way to help prevent our daily lives from going by unexamined.

As we reflect on our daily lives we will find launching points for gratitude, instances of God's presence and activity, as well as items for confession.

This is to be a prayerful reflection on one's relationship with God and with others, as a human being created in love for love, but in need of the support and encouragement of God's presence along the way. As such it can be a powerful aid for a spiritually vital life.²

In the end, the prayer of examen is about noticing: noticing the good gifts God gives us, noticing the presence of God in our lives, and noticing the ways we fail God. When we notice, we become more conscious. When we become more conscious, we grow.³

² *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, 365.

³ Richard Peace, *Meditative Prayer*, A Spiritual Formation Study Guide, 57.