

Examen

Learning to Pray Our Lives

“Investigate my life, O God, find out everything about me; Cross-examine and test me, get a clear picture of what I’m about; See for yourself whether I’ve done anything wrong—then guide me on the road to eternal life.”

Psalm 139: 23-24

The Message

As we grow in discerning God’s presence, we begin to sense what draws us toward living a life of following Jesus and what deadens our hearts and draws us away from God.

As you enter the season of Lent, consider incorporating the practice of Examen into your Lenten journey, trusting God to lead you in this reflective season.

Ignatius of Loyola, the 16-century monk who founded the Society of Jesus (the Jesuits) gave us the prayer practice of Examen. Ignatius believed that God gave him this method of reflecting on a day (or week, or month, or year) of his life as a way of discerning God’s presence in his life, and a way of discerning the way God was calling him to love and to serve his world.

In our own lives, Examen is a most helpful practice. It slows us down to pay attention to

the life we have been living. As we grow in discerning God’s presence, we begin to sense what draws us toward living a life of following Jesus and what deadens our hearts and draws us away from God.

The practice of Examen is done in silence and can be practiced daily, weekly or monthly. You may use your journal as a way to pray, listen and reflect. On the next page we offer you the steps to take you through the prayerful practice of Examen.

Ultimately, the goal is not doing the exercise, but a more intimate walk through life with God who is always present and calls us into His loving embrace.

Psalm 39:1-6

God, investigate my life;
get all the facts firsthand.
I’m an open book to you;
even from a distance, you know what I’m thinking.
You know when I leave and when I get back;
I’m never out of your sight.
You know everything I’m going to say
before I start the first sentence.
I look behind me and you’re there,
then up ahead and you’re there, too—
your reassuring presence, coming and going.
This is too much, too wonderful—I can’t take it all in!

The Message

The Practice of Examen



Before beginning this practice, take 10-15 minutes to prepare to receive what God has for you and simply be with him, the one who formed you. Offer him whatever distractions arise for you. Become aware of the love with which God looks upon you, his beloved child. Pray slowly. Breathe deeply. Enjoy being quiet. "O God, you are my God, for you I long; for you my soul is thirsting." (Psalm 63:1) Ask the Holy Spirit to allow you to experience this time of prayer with love.

"Love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; ... it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right ... Love hopes all things." (1 Cor.13). When you sense you are ready, begin to pray the Examen.

Step One: Gratitude. Take a few minutes to consider who God is. Remind your own heart of his faithful love, his presence with you, his knowledge, his wisdom, his power. Give thanks to God for who he is. "Give thanks to the Lord for he is good. His love endures forever." (1 Chronicles 16:33-35) Remember that God desires to give you fullness of life. As you enter into this time of Examen, remind yourself of his goodness.

Step Two: Petition. Ask God to release you from any distractions and for insight and strength that will make this Examen a work of grace, fruitful beyond your human capacity alone.

Step Three: Review. With the Lord, review the day, week, month or year.

- o Notice the stirrings in your heart and notice the thoughts and remembrances that bring you life and joy and draw you to God. (Consolation).
- o Look also for the times and events when you felt your heart close down or you felt drawn away from God. (Desolation)
- o Review your choices in response to both the consolations and the desolations. Recall events. Explore actions, motives, and responses. Notice the connection of emotions to relationships and happenings. "Test yourselves, to see whether you are living in faith; examine yourselves. Perhaps you yourselves do not realize that Christ Jesus is in you, unless, of course, you fail the test." (2 Cor.13:5)
- o Be gentle with yourself as you reflect over this time, remembering that God forgives and heals.

Step Four: Forgiveness. Ask for the healing touch of the forgiving God who, with love and mercy for you, removes your heart's burdens. "For as high as the heavens are above the earth so great is his love for those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far has he removed our transgressions from us. As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust." (Psalm 103:12)

Step Five: Renewal. Look to the following day and the days/weeks ahead. Use your calendar or planner if you would like. With God, plan how to live in accord with God's loving desire for you and the person he is creating you uniquely to be.

Transition: Aware of God's presence with you, prayerfully conclude the Examen, remembering God's steadfast, unconditional love for you. If you would like, turn to Psalm 104. Praise God, your creator: "I will sing to the Lord all my life; I will sing praise to my God as long as I live. May my meditation be pleasing to him, as I rejoice in the Lord...Praise the Lord, O my soul. Praise the Lord." (Psalm 104:33-35)