

# The Prayer of Examen

## BACKGROUND

The Examen is an ancient reflective exercise originally developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola, who is considered something of the godfather of discernment practices. Many variations on the examen have been adapted over the centuries in different traditions, but they all share a very common base. Those of you of faith will likely want to practice this as a prayer, asking God (or whichever specific person of the Trinity you choose) to accompany you in the process and to be the one who illumines what you are looking for. For those of you of other persuasions, you may perform this as a reflective meditation looking to your source of wisdom or awareness.

The intention of the Examen is to by practice in simple daily living come more to recognize and align with the presence of God (as you understand God) in your life and in so doing to develop your related faculties of discernment. One classic recommendation for those in the midst of a difficult decision is to practice the Examen faithfully for 30 days, looking only at daily experience (not the big question). Then after reflecting on the fruit of the Examen, to then again look at the big question which at that point will (hopefully) appear much clearer. This "works" by means of the 30 days of practice getting the eyes and ears of one's heart "in shape" with the daily aerobic exercise of Examen. With that "aerobic base" laid down - then the heavy lifting can be done much more easily. The athletic analogy is quite intentional (alternates would be art or music) as discernment faculties are developed more through "training" and "exercise" than through "learning" or "thinking."

If you're intrigued by all this, you'll find tons of information on the Examen on the web, some helpful, some confusing. I do recommend a very good intro book on the subject for those interested: *"Sleeping with Bread"* by Dennis Linn, et al.

## SUGGESTION

I am suggesting you perform the Examen for one week minimum - 7 days. Do it daily as instructed below, jotting down a brief journal entry (could even be an email to yourself) each day. At the end of the 7 days, look over your weeklong collective experience and reflect on the whole experience. If you are finding it nourishing, or even intriguing, try continuing for a full 30 days.

## PROCESS:

1. Set aside 10 minutes at the end of the day. Try and find a time that will work each day - just before or after dinner, or right at midnight as a study break, or .... You may want to avoid just before sleep as you'll wander or snooze.
2. Find an undisturbed place (corner?) where you can sit and quiet yourself for a brief reflection.
3. Sit in a comfortable chair, upright, feet on the floor so you are relaxed but not falling asleep.
4. If you have not already determined what "filter" or "net" you're going to look at your day through, do that now. Keep a list of the lenses (a post-it note perhaps) and look it over a time or two allowing one of them to attract you. Once chosen, don't argue with it or rethink it. (see Step #6 for an explanation of the filter)
5. Close your eyes and take a few deep breaths. Put your attention on your breath as a way of keeping your mind occupied, but slowing down. Use your breath as a way to bring your attention inward and be grateful for your life.
6. In the next step, you're going to recall your day slowly looking at it through a question which is looking for a particular indicator of the presence of God. These include: Life and Light (II Cor 3:5-7; John 1:4; John 8:12; Rom. 8:2), Freedom (II Cor. 3:17; Gal. 5:1), Peace (Phil. 4: 7; Col 3:15; Rom 8:6), Joy (Rom. 14 17), Gratitude (Phil 4:6), or the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5). Looking this way for the presence of God, Ignatius called looking for "consolation" (moving toward God), while the opposite experience would be "desolation" (moving away from God). The most traditional filters have been to look for gratitude or light.
7. Now comes the actual examining of the day - this is the essence of the practice. Allow the video tape of your day, beginning from arising from bed in the morning, to play slowly before the movie screen in your head. As you review the day, ask "Where was I \_\_\_\_\_ (most alive, in the light, at peace, truly grateful...) today?" Don't "think" about the question or try to go right to the particular moment when it occurred. Don't rush it and try not to leave anything out - it's all part of your day. As the movie plays, note where your most experienced what you are focusing on (light, peace...).
8. If you want to do the full version (consolation and desolation), then run steps 6 & 7 again looking for the opposite (where was I least —?) and note those moments in the same way.
9. Jot down what the moments of consolation and desolation were, and what your experience in them was. Don't attempt to interpret the experience, or draw lessons - just notice and note. Some journal reflection is appropriate, but less is more - don't overdo it.
10. You're done! The whole thing shouldn't take more than 7-10 minutes (Steps 1-5 = ~1 mins, Steps 7-8 = ~3-5 mins., Step 9 = 3-5 mins.).
11. After some time doing this (at least a week, preferably a month) - read over your notes and reflect on them collectively looking for "What do I notice here? What if any threads can I pick up? What if any current seems to be flowing underneath all of this that may be worth noticing?"