

PRAYING THE EXAMEN

A SIMPLE GUIDE FOR ALL AGES

The Examen

This simple guide offers a variety of ways of praying the Examen, for adults, children and young people, a quick two minute version, a 10-20 minute version, and a longer version reviewing the whole of life.

The Examen was created by Ignatius in the fifth century as a way of encouraging people to reflect on their day with God. He suggested it was done twice a day, but many people do it just at the same time each day (generally at the start, middle, or end of the day).

Originally it consisted of five movements or stages, which have been summarised in a variety of ways. I've drawn on a variety of these outlines to create the one below.

1. THANKSGIVING

Remember that God has created all things and that we are always on the receiving end of his gifts. Begin by looking over the day and see what arises that you are thankful for, both small and big things. Allow gratitude to take hold of you and express this to God.

2. ASK FOR THE SPIRIT/FOR GRACE

Before looking at the moments in the day when we did not act so well, we ask God to fill us with his Spirit so that the Spirit can lead us through this difficult soul-searching. Otherwise, we're liable to hide in denial, wallow in self-pity, or seethe in self-loathing. Therefore ask the Holy Spirit to show you what he wants you to see.

3. FINDING GOD IN ALL THINGS

Again look over the events of the day. This time ask

the Lord to show you where he has been present in your life, either in you or in others, and what he has been asking of you.

Look over your interior moods, feelings, urges, and movements, and see what stands out even slightly. Look for such things as joy, pain, turmoil, increase of love, anger, harmony, anxiety, freedom, enchainment, presence of God, isolation. In what general direction do you think you are being drawn by the Lord? How have you been responding to these experiences or situations that draw you towards the Lord and invite you to be more like him?

More particularly, what attitudes are manifest in these experiences? What do I really desire? Remember that your experience helps you to discover the underlying attitude, and your actions and choices flow from these attitudes. Is there any one place in your heart or any one area you are being asked to focus your attention on, to pray more seriously over, to take action on? This is where your energy needs to focus instead of on the many other things you think are important.

Ignatius spoke often of consolation and desolation, and this part of the examen is a way of getting in touch with these things. Freedom comes as we begin charting the desolations and consolations of our daily existence. Consolation is what is moving me toward God, toward living happy and healthy and holy and free. Desolation is what worries, frustrates, and diverts us from the goal of transformation in Christ. We know we are in desolation when there is a certain restlessness, listlessness, an 'Is this all there is to life?' tone and texture in our soul.



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Desolation may be caused by our not living up to the demands of discipleship. Desolation is not always disagreeable, and consolation is not always comfortable. Parents doing the hard work of disciplining and loving a recalcitrant teenager may not seem to be at peace, but they are in consolation. To know true consolation, we need to know our deepest, truest desires. The Examen can become the habitual work of discernment, paying attention to where we are moving and what is moving us in our relationship to God, others, and our deepest, truest selves.

4. THE GIFTS OF SORROW AND FORGIVENESS

Ask: where did I turn away from God? Seek forgiveness from the Lord for the moments you did not respond to his love. Do not be afraid to ask for the gift of an ever-deepening sorrow for not co-operating with him who loves you.

Take one aspect of life that is a bit off-track and strategise on how to rectify direction in the next 12 or 24 hours. Really doing something is the goal here.

5. HELP AND GUIDANCE FOR TOMORROW

Ask the Father for your needs for tomorrow. For example, you may need to pray to overcome something – or to accept your ‘thorn in the flesh’ – to persevere – to be more sensitive to the Lord’s activity in your life – to let go – to love more – to have a conversion in some area – and so on. There is nothing that can be done without God’s loving assistance and guidance, so ask, look for, trust and co-operate with the Father, Son and Spirit living within you.

A Short Version

This can be practised at any time during the day but is especially suitable as a final thought in bed before falling asleep. Some people do it while brushing their teeth using the timer on their electric toothbrush. One minute of giving thanks, one minute of saying sorry and asking for help. Although it is a short form, it incorporates the principles of the Examen into a regular, instinctive habit of self-awareness.

Of the things that I have done today:

- Which do I now feel most content/happy about? I will thank God for these times.
- Which do I now feel most discomfort about? I will ask for God’s help to cope better with such situations in the future, and, where fitting, I will say that I am sorry.

A Version for Young Children

A simple way to prepare young children for a lengthier, more involved Examen is to begin with a daily ‘highs and lows’ check-in. The whole family can participate.

At the end of the day (perhaps over dinner), have each person share their ‘highs’ and ‘lows’ for the day: What was the best thing that happened today? What was the worst? As each person shares his or her highs and lows, have another person offer a prayer for whatever that person mentioned.

Explain that we can give the events of our days back to God in prayer. We can give the ‘highs’ back to God in the form of



our joy and thanks, and we can give the lows back to God by 'offering them up' – that is, uniting our suffering (no matter how small) with the suffering of Christ on the cross, so that God might take our suffering and turn it into something good, just as he did in the resurrection.

A Version for Older Children

- **Breathe** Be still and say hello to God. Breathe in deeply saying 'You are here God', breathe out saying 'I am with you.'
- **Give thanks** Think about the day – what are you thankful for? Thank God for it.
- **How do I feel?** Think about how you feel (you can think about it, imagine a picture or draw how you feel). Once you know how you are feeling share this with god.
- **Captured moment** Think about a moment of the day that stands out. Talk to God about it.
- **Look forward** Think about the next few hours/next ay, and choose to trust in God and be hopeful.

There is a [video](#) explaining this approach with a hand gesture for each stage, and downloadable card.

Various Ways to Remember the Examen

People use a variety of aide-memoires to practise the Examen, either as a whole or in part.

- **Replay** the day in order to recognise your emotions and God's presence with you. Ask: what happened today?
- **Rejoice** in all the good things of the day. Ask: where did I feel grace today? Where was God particularly present?
- **Repent** of the ways in which you did not follow Jesus wholeheartedly. Ask: where did I feel emotional pain today? Where did I sin?
- **Resolve** to live differently tomorrow, if need be. Ask: what help do I need from Jesus to help me live for him tomorrow?

Alternatively:

- **Presence** Stop. Breathe. Be here now. Let the sense of the nearness of God settle into your consciousness.
- **Praise** For who he is and what he has done.



- **Process** What's going on in your consciousness?
- **Penance** Ask God to reveal to you if there is anything that needs tweaking in your life.
- **Promise** Trust God's promises and ask for God's grace to live by them.

Examen of a Whole Life

Here is an example of how one could make an Examen of one's entire life. It is best made with pen and paper to hand. The basic principles of the Examen can be applied to any period of time – the preceding hour (as in the review of prayer), day, term, year... the time one has lived in the same place or done the same job... or one's entire life up till now.

- I begin from the desire to see my life as part of salvation history. As well as the external human history, there is another dimension – the story of God's work in me. On the one hand are the opportunities God has provided; on the other are my half-hearted responses. So I begin with thanking God for bringing me to where I now am.
- I want this examination to be as honest as possible. So I ask God for knowledge of the truth, including knowledge of my sins.
- This third point is the main part of the exercise. I make a note of the most important steps in my growing relationship with God (about eight is a good number). These steps, or stepping-stones, may be single events, or they may be periods of growth. They may be explicitly religious, or they may be connected to the human process of maturing that I did not think of in terms of God at the time. I make a brief note of each as it occurs to me. Afterwards I can order them chronologically, so I have an idea of the overall shape of my life. There may also be steps backward, or perhaps sideways. When I have done this I am in a position to see what in my life I want to thank God for. I take time over this, being grateful for all that now seems positive in my history. Only after I have done that do I look at the ways in which I have fallen short. Remembering the events that I am now grateful for, how could I have given more room in my life for the things that really matter?
- I express my sorrow for the ways in which I have sinned and the areas of my life in which there is still an element of sin.
- What priorities would I like to reaffirm for the future? Are there any practical steps I can take that would help redirect my life on better lines?
- I may close the exercise with the Lord's Prayer, which puts my request for forgiveness in the context of God's will for the world.

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James Lawrence
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