

II. Apophatic Practices:

D. Examen of Consciousness

1. Ignatius of Loyola



About 500 years ago, a soldier of fortune, Ignatius of Loyola, was grievously wounded in battle. During his extended recovery time, laid up in bed with nothing to read but a few books given him by his devout hosts, he had a powerful spiritual awakening and embarked on a life committed to the pursuit of God. In 1543, with six friends, he took a solemn vow to serve the earth and to serve God. Together, these friends founded the Society of Jesus, or Jesuit order, committed to advancing God's Kingdom through education, social justice, and human rights. Ignatius became their first Superior General.

Rooted deeply in their mission was the pursuit of personal spiritual formation, and toward that end, Ignatius began to instruct those in his charge in various spiritual exercises. Among these was a particular form of reflection and journaling called

Examen of Consciousness.

2. What Is Examen of Consciousness?

Examen is a way of praying that looks for the movement of the Divine Spirit in and around us as we reflect on our lives at day's end. While it is most commonly an evening practice, it can be practiced at any time or place. Many practice it twice a day, once at lunchtime, and again before bed.

There are five simple steps to *The Prayer of Examen*, and it takes about 10-15 minutes to complete. Through this form of prayer, the soul grows in awareness that self is rooted in a Divine Center, and that life is best lived in a daily dance with the indwelling Spirit of God. Through this form of prayer, practitioners become more sensitized to their own spirits, their own longings, virtues and vices. They also become more sensitized to the Divine Spirit calling them ever forward on the spiritual journey. Practitioners avail themselves of Divine strength and support available to them in God's Spirit.

One benefit of *Examen* is that as we chronicle the unfolding of our spiritual lives, we heighten our awareness of the work of God going on in us. If we are willing, God is always leading us forward, transforming and redeeming our souls, but spiritual formation happens at such a measured pace, we often miss the small, unhurried movements. *Examen* is one of the ways we tune in to this process, and are both made aware of the God's work within us, and empowered to partner with it.

3. How Examen Is Practiced

Find a quiet place where you are least likely to be disturbed. You might light a candle or change the lighting to signal to yourself the beginning of reflection. Sit comfortably and still yourself. Relax. Be aware of your breathing, and dismiss the compulsion to hurry that so attends our days.

Step 1: Recall that you are in God's presence

- Offer a simple prayer of remembrance: "God, I now give my attention to Your Presence."
- Or... "Holy Spirit, alert me to see my day through the lens of Divine understanding."
- Or... "Lord, as I reflect on my day, may I look on all that I see with love."

Step 2: Recall your day

- Spend a moment chronicling your day and bringing it to your memory.
- I (Doug) jot some bullet points of the day's events to help bring the day back to my mind.
- Recall moments and be grateful for them, being very concrete in your gratitude.
Recall the sights, tastes, smells and laughter of the day, and be thankful.
Also, take stock of what you received and what you gave this day.
Recall where one of your strengths served you well, and be grateful for your intelligence, your humor, your faith, or your health.

Step 3: Ask for insight

- Ask the Spirit of God to help you look at your attitudes and actions with honesty and patience.
"The Spirit... will guide you into all truth." (Jn. 16:13)
- Ask the Spirit for help seeing your life unfold as an emerging story.
- Ask the Spirit to help you see yourself without either condemnation or complacency, and thus be open to growth.
- Ask to learn, ask to grow, and ask for a deepened knowledge of yourself, and of God's Spirit within you.

Step 4: Reflect on your day

- This is the longest of the steps.
- Explore why you did what you did today. What were your motivations and what was your intent?
- What was going on in your heart when you spoke this, or did that?
- Reflect on what you wanted to achieve by your actions or words.
- Was your heart divided? Did you waver between...
helping and disregarding?
scoffing and encouraging?
listening and ignoring?
rebuking and forgiving?
speaking and remaining silent?
neglecting and thanking?
- This is not a time to dwell on your shortcomings, but to gently look, to see yourself.

Note where you freely chose the path you walked, and where you were swept along without freedom, by forces outside of yourself.

- Note your reactions to people and circumstances.
- Did those reactions help or hinder you?
- Did they reflect the Life of God's Spirit within you, or did they reflect some more base part of you?

In these many questions, we're really asking ourselves two fundamental questions...

- Where was the Spirit of God present (always), and I participated? (ancient word: "*consolation*")
- Where was the Spirit of God present (always), and I did not participate? (ancient word: "*desolation*")

As you practice this daily reflection, and explore the mystery of yourself, you will become more familiar with your own tendencies, your own strengths and weaknesses. You will also become more aware of how the promptings of God's Spirit work with your life, your soul.

Step 5: Have a heart-to-heart talk with God

- Speak to God about your reflections.
- Share your thoughts on your actions, your words, your motivations.
- Share a concern, express a point of appreciation.
- Perhaps you will ask for direction to in the days before you.
- Or ask for forgiveness for your shortcomings and disappointments.

- In this time, look upon yourself with compassion, even in the face of your failures.
- Ask God for help in those areas you find yourself weak.
- Express sorrow at the Darkness in your heart, and invite more experience of Light tomorrow.
- Celebrate those times today, that you better saw God's life flowing in and through you.

4. A Personal Rhythm

When you have done the *Prayer of Examen* for a while, you'll discover a rhythm and pattern of your own. You'll feel free to dwell on one of the steps more thoroughly, and to give another less attention.

- You might also find that music, candles, or a cup of Sleepytime Tea might help you look forward to the Prayer as a part of your evening routine.
- You may also want to arrange the steps on a bookmark for your nighttime reading. I find this helps remind me to be faithful to the practice.

God bless you.

5. A Tool to Help You

Feel free to format, modify, and laminate the content below into a bookmark for your evening reading. This will serve as a reminder and aid for your practice of *Examen*.

Examen of Consciousness

Step 1: Recall God's presence

- God, I give my attention to Your Presence.
- Holy Spirit, help me see my day through Divine eyes

Step 2: Recall your day

- some bullet points of day's events to bring things to mind

Step 3: Ask for insight

- God help me see my attitudes and actions clearly w/o condemnation or complacency

Step 4: Reflect on your day

- Why did I do what I did today?
- What were my motivations?
- Where did I participate w/ God?
- Where did I fail to participate?

Step 5: A heart-to-heart w/ God

- Better tomorrow than today.