

Contemplating your Heart and Mind before God

A) THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN

Every wisdom tradition throughout the centuries has emphasized self-reflection and evaluation as essential to our growth and development as people. Most noted was Socrates, who long ago asserted, “Know thyself!” Examining ourselves is an act of responsible living before our Maker. This practice is imperative to our growth as Christians. A life not fully examined is a life not fully lived.

Christians who probe and audit themselves are more cognizant of what God has done and also more self-aware. Thus, they are increasingly receptive to the work the Spirit of God may be seeking to do in and through them. Examination is an intentional act that has an integral role in our spiritual formation. It is vitally illuminating and a dynamic experience of prayerful reflection that celebrates and enhances one’s awareness and response to the Lord, who is present and active in our experience. Through it, we can develop an intimate and ingenuous relationship with him.

The biblical record provides us with ample precedence for the value, need, place, and practice of the examen.

“You have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise...You perceive my thoughts from afar... Search me O God, and know me, test me and know my anxious thoughts and see if there be any wickedness in me.” (Psalm 139:3-24)

Though you probe my heart and examine me at night, though you test me, you will find nothing...” (Psalm 17:3)

“Let us examine our ways and test them and let us return to the Lord.” (Lamentations 3:40)

Listening to God through an examen of our past can serve a useful purpose in helping us gain a better perspective of our life in him. We sometimes are better able to hear God speak to us in reflection (like the two on the Emmaus Road in Luke 24:13ff) as we note experiences and events that have marked our journey.

Here are some examen questions to process, which will hopefully help you hear what God wants to say to you.

- Review your *day* slowly. What stands out? What are you thankful for? What do you regret or not thankful for? What caused you joy and pain? [Pay attention to small things, like feeling satisfaction for doing a job well or feeling sorry for missing something important. Pay attention to the memories of the way you felt about things.]
- Genesis 1:10, 12, 18, 21, tells us...*“God saw that it was good.”* On the sixth day, verse 31 states, *“God saw all that he had made, and it was very good.”* Reflect on your past *week* regarding your work, your ministry and your relationships – What can you declare as being “good” or even “very good?” What was “not good?” Why? What do your actions (or failures to act) tell you? Ask yourself what your feelings reveal. Did your feelings manifest a willingness to listen to God or to ignore him?
- What patterns do you see over the last *day* or *week*? Does God have anything to say to you through them? [Take your observations to prayer asking for insight and understanding.]

B) THE EXAMEN OF CONSCIOUSNESS

How do things stand between God and me? Where am I coming from? Where is my life in Christ going? These questions are the heart of this examen. Find a quiet place to be in God's presence and pray this simple prayer as a preface for your time: *“Father, I receive you now.”* Here are five steps to guide you through the process.

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1. Thank God for the good things that have come into your week/day. Try to be specific and personal as possible. For example, I thank God for the meal I had or the clothes I wear or the beauty of a sunny (or rainy) day or the joy I have had. In this process, you can also encounter a negative thought or experience for which you are not able to thank God. This too must be noted since it may reveal a spiritual or emotional issue that needs your attention. (*Father I thank you for... Father, for these things I recognize I am not thankful...*)
2. Now ask God to give you the ability/ gift to see clearly how you are growing more fully alive in him in and through them and how you may be kept from growing. (*Spirit of the Living God, help me to see me as you do...*)
3. Examine carefully what your actions, omissions, thoughts, and desires tell you about your relationship with God and with yourself and others in Christ. Sometimes a single event stands out dramatically; for instance: I lost my temper badly; I felt very great joy at a piece of news; I resisted making a decision someone asked me to make; I spent much too long a time on a simple task. Patiently, ask yourself what your action or attitude meant. Did it embody love of God, or fear or distrust? Did it suggest that you have gotten over-committed, and why would you get over-committed? Did it suggest that you do not approve of where you are in your journey with Jesus?

When there is no event that stands out, but you find there is a pattern emerging in the day; for instance: all day long I felt anxious and worried; every time I saw a certain person, I wanted to have his or her attention; I got things done swiftly and easily; I erupted in anger over little things. You ask yourself, what this pattern means about your relationship with Jesus and your trust and love for him.

Maybe for you now the climate in your life might emerge as clearly as the day's weather.; for instance: I have grown very dissatisfied in my work ; I felt confident all day while asking God for something I want a lot.; I am growing more aware of God's loving gaze on me. (*As I reflect back on this week/day with your help, bring to my attention expressions of my life in word or deed so I may evaluate, understand and learn...*)

4. Take what you have learned to prayer, asking God and telling him whatever you need to say. Give yourself time to let God surprise you with insight and console you with faith and hope. You bring to God the larger needs that you feel right now – an old resentment that you seem unable to shake; an inveterate habit that you badly want to get rid of; a kind of mindless living through the day without thanking and praising my creator, a hurtful experience that lingers; a future that is vague. You beg God to teach you and help you accept the teaching. (*Oh Lord, hear my prayer...come have mercy on me...*)
5. Finally, You desire to keep your spirit filled with gratitude, and to take steps to get rid of mind-sets that stand between your creator and you. You seek to alter your attitude, release a fear, or grow in some special way. You offer this larger work to Jesus as Lord and Creator of your life. You ready yourself to accept any other change the Spirit is seeking to incur in yourself were you to receive what you had sought. (*"Restore to me the joy or your salvation and grant me a willing spirit to sustain me."- Psalm 51:12*)

(This has been gleaned and adapted from a handbook entitled, Choosing Christ in the World- The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola by Joseph Tetlow, S.J. St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Resource. 1989)

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