

METANOIA

A Soul-Tending Resource for Christ-Formation
January 2023, Sixteenth Issue

THE DAILY EXAMEN

*Prayerfully reviewing our day -
turning everyday experiences into divine direction.*

by Ann Starrette

THE DAILY EXAMEN is a spiritual practice that has helped people for centuries turn everyday experiences into divine direction. This daily discernment exercise, designed by St. Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556), grew out of his experience of feeling lost and finding his way. Over time, practicing the *Examen* brings calm clarity to our choice-making. After a while, we wonder, “Why didn’t I see this before!?”

CHOICES

No one knows for sure, but I’ve read that we make thousands upon thousands of decisions daily — most of them subconsciously. For the most part, we don’t even know why we do what we do. The *Examen* helps us become more aware of what we are doing, why we are doing it, and where God might be in the midst of it all. *Discernment* comes from the Latin verb, which means to separate, to distinguish, to see without confusion and ambiguity what differentiates things. In his book *Discernment, The Art of Choosing Well* (based on Ignatius Spirituality), Pierre Wolff offers: “To choose the sidewalk, for example, is to choose not to walk on the street. But this simple choice presupposes that we are able to distinguish the sidewalk from the street more clearly than, say, a drunken person whose sight and balance are disturbed by alcohol.”

CRUCIAL BELIEFS

In other words, if we are not willing to consistently stay in the Word and prayer, we won’t have “new

eyes” or a “renewed mind” or a “heart that understands.” Our balance will be off. We’ll sway toward the world’s ways rather than God’s ways. Thus, our ability to discern will be significantly hindered. Wolff further says at least three foundational beliefs are crucial for the practice of spiritual discernment.

They are:

- ✧ Belief in the goodness of God,
- ✧ Belief that love is our primary calling,
- ✧ Belief that God communicates with us through the Holy Spirit.



We have to believe that God is always good and always rooting for us, and calling out to us to listen and pay attention. But we humans often fail to slow down and take notice.

Because God is constantly revealing himself to us through our experiences, St. Ignatius saw the *Examen* as the cornerstone of spiritual life—so much so that when others asked if they could skip their prayer exercises, he told them to skip anything but the *Examen*.

MY INTRODUCTION

I stumbled upon the *Examen* in 2000 through the book *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*. The *Examen* is a way of prayerfully reviewing our day and noticing the wisdom of our bodies with an eye of gratitude and a heart for seeing God’s hand at work in our whole experience — mind, body, soul.

*People do not learn from experience.
People learn when they reflect upon experience.*

~ Saint Ignatius of Loyola

I cannot begin to tell you how it has helped me notice my God-given nature, spiritual gifts, and heart desires. For example, my childhood babysitter once told me I always was running off. She couldn't keep me in the yard to play. Taking this to mean I was a "bad kid," I re-told the story to my nephew. He said, "Aunt Ann, you weren't a bad kid. You were just bored." So true. I do bore easily. People often tell me I'm involved in too much, but variety and possibility bring me to life! I said, "But Robbie [my then twenty-five-year-old nephew], she said I was bossy too." And he shot right back, "Now, Aunt Ann, I wouldn't let that bother me one bit! There are a lot of people in this world that need to be told what to do." True again.

In high school, my driving force was not to study but to play basketball. In college, I had a cream puff job in the financial aid office. I was very good at that job, but whenever the mailman came 'round, I'd think, "I'd love that job!" When I began doing the *Examen*, I noticed it was very difficult for me to sit, and although I can do a job and do it well, I come alive when I can move around—like a basketball player or the mailman.

For instance, when preparing to lead a retreat, I can stay put for an hour or so then I get up, set my kitchen timer for fifteen minutes, whirl around getting all kinds of "busy work" done, then go back to the designing and preparing of the retreat. I also love creating the retreat space because I'm moving about trying out various ideas, etc. My bossiness developed into seeing the big picture and inviting others to come alongside to go places we may have been unable or unwilling to go without spiritual companionship.

CATCH THE THIEF - CHOOSE LIFE

It's a simple awareness but at least I'm not beating myself up thinking I have ADD (attention deficit disorder), am bossy, or was a "bad kid."

John 10:10 tells us, "The thief comes to steal, kill and destroy, but I come that you might have life and have it more abundantly." The *Examen* helps us discern our thief and what brings us life. One thing is sure; God desires that you and I be about what gives us life and

that which enables us to receive and give love. When we are, we bring life and love to those around us. And that, my friend, is the real bottom line in any economy, household, or business.

TELL ME AGAIN. What is the *Examen*?

The *Examen* is a method of reviewing your day in the presence of God. It has five steps, which most people take more or less in order, and it usually takes minutes per day. Actually, it's an attitude more than a method, a time set aside for thankful reflection on where God is in your everyday life.

WHY?

Quiet simply, praying the *Examen* affords us 1) the opportunity to become aware of the ways God's presence has been pursuing us while we've been awake. 2) It encourages us to pay attention to the promptings of God that we may have missed, and 3) it reveals times we were less than Christ-like. 4) This grants us an opportunity to receive the grace and forgiveness of Jesus again.

HOW?

The *Examen* has been practiced in different ways through the years. It essentially involves a mix of gratitude, careful review, Godly sorrow, forgiveness, and renewing grace. At the end, I offer ways and resources. I encourage you to find your way to pray and stick with one way for a while until you've established a rhythm. Here it is in a nutshell:

1. **REQUEST.** Ask God for light.
I want to look at my day with God's eyes, not my own.
2. **RELISH.** Give Thanks.
The day I have just lived is a gift from God. Be grateful for it.
3. **REVIEW.** What drew me to God? Distanced me from God?
I carefully look back on the day just completed, being guided by the Holy Spirit.
4. **REPENT.** Face your shortcomings
I face up to what is wrong — in my life and in me.
5. **RESOLVE.** Look toward the day to come.
I ask where I need God in the day to come.

A deep relationship with God begins with a habit of prayer and reflection.

~ Andy Otto

CONSIDERATIONS

While using the *Examen* as a spiritual practice is simple, like any new habit, incorporating it into daily life takes time and “want to.” One guideline is to pray the *Examen* in the evening— which works for many people. Even though it can take only five to eight minutes, many of us are too tired in the evening. Some people find that prayerfully reviewing their day is done best the following morning. My best time is around 4:45 pm as I transition from my work day to the evening rhythms. What is realistic for you?

As with anything, a lot of it is determined by how badly we want something. Experiment. Little things that can help:

1. Create a space within your home as a “meeting place” with God.
 - Establish a set time. Make it a habit.
 - Choose a guideline prompt to prayerfully review your day under the gaze of the Holy Spirit. Rather than the five-step process, I started with two questions: *What brought me life today? What drained life from me today?*
 - Listen, journal, asking God how God is inviting you to hold on to and live what brings you to life, what brings you closer to God.
 - As you look forward to the day to come, ask God to keep working into your heart, mind, and soul what is intended for you.
2. Other helps in creating a rhythm could be praying the *Examen* when you walk, exercise, or do a mindless chore. For support, you may form or participate in an existing group to share your journey of being shaped by the daily *Examen*.
3. The idea behind the *Examen* is to allow God to search your heart, offered in the spirit of Psalm 139:23-24 — opening yourself to how God has been moving throughout your day. Do it anytime that works best for you. The main thing is to begin.
4. Research the various practice suggestions and resources that follow to see what works for you.

5. Stay as faithful as your life allows and see where it takes you.

*God, examine me
and know my heart,
test me and know
my concerns.
Make sure that I am
not on my way to
ruin, and guide me
on the road of
eternity.*



Psalm 139: 23-24

Alongside you,

Ann

Ann Starrette
Office of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care - for the deeper journey
www.TheLydiaGroup.com | www.SchooloftheSpirit.com

PRACTICE

My *Examen* prayer has evolved over the years. However, I began, and often go back to, asking myself a variation of two questions:

- For what am I most grateful? / For what am I least grateful?
- What enlivened me? / What drained me?
- What simplified my life today? / What complicated my life today?

Over time, you'll notice a thread that will empower you to make choices toward life and love. Here's the process I used for myself and with a small group:

1. Light a candle if you wish. The candle's flame symbolizes the light of divine revelation in our everyday life. Get comfortable. Sitting erect with both feet flat on the floor is best. Put your right hand over your heart as you focus on your breath (*Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it flow the issues of life.* Prov. 4:23). Slowly follow

*My dear children, for whom I am again in the
pains of childbirth until Christ is formed in you.*

~ Galatians 4:19

the in and out of your breath. Breathe in God's unconditional love. When you breathe out, fill the space around you with that unconditional love.

2. When the time seems right, ask the Holy to bring to your heart:
 - What brought life today?
 - What made my heart sing?
 - When was I best able to give and receive love?
 - What pulled me like a magnet?
 - When did I lose track of time?
 - Consider your environment, the situation, the circumstances, the people you were with, the time of day and when you lost track of it.
 - Don't force. Just wait. Allow the Holy to reveal the answer when and how it chooses. Be with and enjoy that time again. Giving thanks, make a few notes in your journal.
3. Next, ask the Holy to bring to your heart:
 - What was draining today?
 - What was difficult?
 - What was said and done in that moment that made it so difficult or draining?
 - What were my blocks? Where was I resistant? Testy? Stubborn? Short? Unkind?
 - When was I least able to give and receive love?
 - Be with it — embrace it without trying to change or fix it in any way. Appreciate that you are not denying what is and that God is with you. *Take some deep breaths and allow God's love to fill you just as you are.* Embrace love.
 - Again, make a few notes in your journal. Healing occurs to the degree that we welcome all our feelings and let ourselves be loved by God in the midst of them.
4. Last, go to sleep, holding onto what gives you life. **This is key!** Research finds that what we go to sleep thinking about influences our choices tomorrow. **Choose life.** Asking these questions and paying attention to the answers equip and empower us on our path toward healing and wholeness. We get better at noticing God's presence and invitations

in the story of our lives. We get better at telling the truth about who we are and what we need. We also get better at identifying what we need to stop doing, start doing, and keep on doing to be more our authentic self.

The *Examen* is a simple spiritual tool that can offer profound guidance when practiced faithfully, even semi-faithfully. Remember, God is always good. God is always rooting for you, wanting to show you the path. God loves you so much that he even gave you the Indwelling Spirit as a guide and helper. God also gave you free choice to access it and use it—or not.

Explore Further. . .

WEB:

- <http://ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/>. This site is a service of Loyola Press, a Jesuit Ministry. You will find a wealth of ways to experiment with the Daily *Examen*.

RETREAT CENTER:

- <https://ignatiushouse.org/> An excellent Ignatian retreat center in Atlanta that offers an array of Ignatian Spirituality retreats and programs.

BOOKS:

- *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives you Life* by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn. At first glance, this little book looks like a children's book, but it is not. It is power-packed with teaching examples of using the *Examen* to gain clarity in daily life. This resource makes for a great group experience of praying the *Examen*.
- *Reimagining the Ignatian Examen: Fresh Ways to Pray from Your Day* by Mark E. Thibodeaux, SJ. Each "day" reading/praying is only 2 or 3 pages long. An EASY "daily reader!" to pick up again and again. There are 34 "Daily Examen" pages - numbered 1 – 34. I strongly suggest that rather than reading this like a book that you "encounter" the

COME, LORD JESUS!

Daily *Examen* that corresponds with the day of the month — you'll have three left over (32-34). You'll figure out how to get those in. I use this little book as a way of placing my day before God in the late afternoon. It is the way I bookend my day in prayer. You may consider engaging in this way of prayerfully reviewing your day every 3 or 4 months — or you may find a few pages that really hit the mark that you will use on Sundays. Notice how the Spirit invites you. Come to this out of a desire for God and self-knowledge, not out of duty.

- *Discernment, The Art of Choosing Well* by Pierre Wolff. Although we frequently hear the word *discernment*, the process remains mysterious for many people. Wolff walks us through an ancient process based on Ignatian Spirituality.
- *The Grace I Seek: A Daily Spiritual Journal* from IgnatianResources.com is a 13-week daily coil-bound journal that will help you build a daily pattern of prayer. By asking God for a grace (the help you need) each morning and then reflecting in the evening—and then weekly, you invite God into your daily and weekly rhythm of life. The journal includes:
 - An explanation of how to use the journal
 - Daily and weekly reflection prompts
 - Extra space for writing and further reflection each day
 - Weekly Ponder Questions and a space for prayer intentions
 - An appendix of prayers
 - The *Examen* prayer, easily accessible on the back cover

Spiritual reading always seems to provide a *prompt to pray* for the grace (help) I seek. Using the Prayer of *Examen* is one way, when we're ready, God can shed light on our duplicity, deceitfulness, and darkness—fragmentation and multiplicity. The *Examen* opens us to God's slow work in us — the work He alone knows we need. May we begin with patient trust?



PATIENT TRUST

Above all, trust in the slow work of God.

We are quite naturally impatient in everything to reach the end without delay.

We should like to skip the intermediate stages.

We are impatient of being on the way to something unknown, something new.

And yet it is the law of all progress that it is made by passing through some stages of instability — and that it may take a very long time.

And so I think it is with you;
your ideas mature gradually — let them grow,
let them shape themselves, without undue haste.
Don't try to force them on,
as though you could be today what time
(that is to say, grace and circumstances acting on your
own good will) will make of you tomorrow.

Only God could say what this new spirit
gradually forming within you will be.
Give Our Lord the benefit of believing
that his hand is leading you,
and accept the anxiety of feeling yourself
in suspense and incomplete.

~ PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN SJ —
excerpted from *Hearts on Fire*