Beginning to Pray the Examen

An Introduction with Explanatory Notes  
(Allen Doerksen+)

**The Examen in Five Steps**

Before we begin, as in all prayer, we remind ourselves that we are in God’s presence and we ask for God’s favour and help during our prayer time

1. **Gratitude:** recall anything from the day for which you are especially grateful, and give thanks.
2. **Review:** Recall the events of the day, from start to finish, noticing where you felt God’s presence, where you felt consolation, desolation and everything else in between. Notice where you accepted or turned away from any invitation to grow in love.
3. **Sorrow:** Recall any actions for which you are sorry.
4. **Forgiveness:** Ask for God’s forgiveness. Decide whether you want to reconcile with anyone you have hurt.
5. **Grace:** Ask God for the grace you need for the next day and an ability to see God’s presence more clearly.

Introduction

*The Struggle*: Consistent, prayerful practice is difficult for most of us, myself included. We learn prayers, like the Lord’s Prayer or the Trinity Prayer,[[1]](#footnote-1) and these are helpful and good, but often our praying feels divorced from the experiences of our everyday lives.

*Creating a Connection:* It was Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, who, in the 16th century c.e. who first began to teach the Examen in a systematic way. The Examen is a prayer pattern that seeks to connect our praying with the hours of our day, creating a connection between our lived experience and God’s Presence. The word “Examen” comes from the Spanish word which means “examination of conscience/consciousness;” both meanings must be included to get a more accurate understanding of what the Examen is.

*Awareness*: The Examen is generally prayed at the end of the day in one 15-20 minute period. Using the steps outlined on the previous page, we “examine” our day through five distinct but interrelated practices that help us become aware of God’s presence.

*Relationship*: Cultivating a relationship with God is similar (though in some significant ways quite different!) to building a relationship with a partner or friend, it happens through mutual self-revelation. The Examen structures a way to “catch up with God” in the middle or at the end of the day so that the relationship can continue to grow.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Setting

I would advise you to find a comfortable chair in which you can situate yourself with your feet on the ground and a relatively straight back. You’re looking for a way to sit that keeps you alert but not uncomfortable. This type of posture is recommended for most types of prayer, meditation or contemplation. Alternatively, some people are able to center themselves by walking or even jogging though the elevated heart-rate of the latter activity does seem to against reflection. Lying down is not recommended for obvious reasons.

Preparation

As with every prayer, we prepare by asking God’s grace. We exist from God’s largesse, God’s spaciousness, and it is this “roominess” in which we live move and have our being.[[3]](#footnote-3) By consciously asking for grace we invite ourselves into the realm of gift and favour.

Gratitude

We recall the good things that happened to us during the day and we give thanks for any benefits. This is essential for several reasons: there’s the psychological reality that we are far more likely to apprehend God’s presence from a place of thanksgiving than ingratitude. By giving thanks to God we establish what we’re doing as prayer; though retrospective, this is present communication with God.

Ignatius means benefits in the broadest possible sense. Obvious things would include any good news, a tender moment, an exhilarating moment; finishing a work project; less obvious things might be a surprising sight of sunlight on a rainy day; the taste of a ham-and-cheese sandwich, a general feeling of satisfaction at the end of a tiring day caring for young children. Relishing or savouring even inconsequential things is an antidote for a busy life and world. Thanksgiving orients us toward “human beings” rather than “human doings.” Pausing to enjoy what has happened reveals the hidden joys of our days. As the Indian Jesuit Anthony de Mello said, “you sanctify whatever you are grateful for.”

When we are aware of gift and privilege, when we are living from gratitude we are most alive, most ourselves, most human. The Examen asks us to begin with gift: gratitude is what is given and God is, above all else, a giver. God gives immediately, the moment our hearts say “yes” to God’s desire for relationship with us. God gives copiously, endlessly pouring out in gifts of love greater than our hearts can fathom.

So, when we are aware of gift and privilege, of gratitude we know, not only ourselves, but God as God really is. Gratitude, then, is uniquely the foundation of mutual self-revelation and therefore of growth in relationship with God.

The practice of gratitude can be “whatever comes to mind” or gratitude can be elicited by going through the day chronologically and calling to mind items, events, and people for which and for whom we are grateful.

Review

Basically you ask, **“What happened today?”** Think of it as a movie playing in your head. Push the play button and run through your day, from start to finish. As you do, go slow enough to notice what made you happy, sad, what stressed you out, what confused you, when you felt love, when you gave love? Recall everything: sights, sounds, feelings, tastes, textures and conversations. Thoughts words and deeds as Ignatius said. Each moment offers a window into where God has been in your day.

To the objection, but I already know what happened today, what the Examen teaches us is: yes and no. What we need to notice God is a kind of “second sight.” Upon “second sight” we begin to notice the people we avoid, the people we embrace. Things that produce resistance in us e.g. working with a certain colleague, a parishioner that always has problems, a family member that calls at the strangest and most awkward moments, are often the very circumstances/people through whom God is inviting us to grow.

***This “movie review” of our day is the heart of the Examen***. But, for what, within the total richness of our interior experience, are we looking? What is the content of this spiritual review? We can follow up with another question, **“What kinds of experiences are spiritually significance?”** As we review we are making discerning judgements about recurring patterns of thought and behaviour. We are noticing times of joy and sadness. We understand that even as we’re reviewing we’re thinking about our thinking, our words and our actions. Remembering that this is prayer helps us believe that the Holy Spirit might be involved in highlighting certain thoughts, certain words or actions e.g. we have a recurring dream and begin to wonder in our Review, “Why am I dreaming thus and so?” Or we notice as we review our hours, that we’re in avoidance in certain people or tasks and we begin to wonder “why am I in avoidance mode?” Times of spiritual energy and joy and times of interior heaviness are common to us all; the first question is one of awareness.

Thoughts arise in all of us: some that have the impress of Christ’s kingdom: “I’ll say hi to that colleague who’s been going through a rough time;” others that have the impress darkness, “I’ll show him a thing or two…” The first question is one of awareness; can we discern which are which?

Expectations arise in us: reality deals a blow to those expectations. We struggle to harmonize with our sense of God and with our own identity. Are we able, within the richness of our daily experiences and feelings to answer these questions, “Where was God in my day?” “Did I respond to God’s call?” “To what was God calling me?” “Were there thoughts and inclinations that drew me away from God’s will; did I or did I not resist them?” “Was the use of my freedom in accord with God’s loving desires?”

The discernment that we gain from the review is not always immediate. Sometimes it requires conversation with a friend or priest who might aid us in the process. The Review might spur all manner of pursuits, research and conversation; that is part of its genius.

Sorrow

Throughout our day we experience times of love and joy and times of “sorrow,” times when we’re disconcerted by certain actions or thoughts or words. Each has something to teach us.

Sorrow is the emotional equivalent of physical pain, an unpleasant experience that is actually a gift that highlights danger and/or deep connection. A feeling of sorrow is a warning shot across our bow in the same way that a “yow” is your clue to remove your hand from the element. Even deep existential sorrow about the “brokenness of things” generally in our world is God’s way of getting our attention.

To not ever feel sorry or sorrowful is to live into less than we’re made for. To be sorry for what we’ve done wrong is not the same thing as wallowing in guilt but, rather, a recognition that God desires to guide us towards wisdom, towards a life that is the truly flourishing.

Receiving Forgiveness from God

It’s precisely because we are loved and held in our finite brokenness that we can confess our sins. Because it is Love’s intention to transform our lowly estate into a palace of glory, confessing our sins is the furthest thing from self-flagellation but a flinging open of the windows of heaven, of light, of hope.

We confess our sins both of omission and commission because in doing so we open to the abundant life, new motivation, strength and cleared lines of communication. We breathe our sins out and breathe in God’s forgiveness, God’s acceptance. “You are my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased” God said to Jesus at his Baptism. We are “in Christ” and therefore we claim those words as our own.

Renewal: Grace for the Next Day

The pattern of the Examen is to look back so we can see the present; just so the pattern of the Examen is a look back so that we can see the future. We pray the Examen with the future in mind. We pray the Examen because we want to live better, more joyfully, more fully with God in our lives. We pray the Examen because we believe in progress. We pray the Examen because progress only happens as spiritual practices inform and transform the way we live our daily lives.

The fifth step is not merely asking for God’s grace the next day but a brief “pre-Examen” of the next day. Often, if we stop and think about it, we have some sense what the next day will hold. In the fifth step we invite God’s favour, grace and mercy into those things we know will happen as well as into those areas that have yet to unfold e.g. “with this person patience will be needed,” “with this case, research needs to be fit in somewhere,” “these chores need to be completed.”

Looking ahead we realize we have plenty of choices and some tasks already chosen. If, in looking ahead, we dread the next day, that already tells us something; let’s say, for argument, you’re going to be with someone who’s mean to you; or, maybe, you’ve taken on too much. You might not be able to do something about this, though I’d argue the pre-examen is already doing something very important, but the biggest impact can come in the days that lie beyond the next day.

But perhaps your “pre-Examen” opens a path for creativity! Perhaps you can meet that mean person in a neutral environment, say, a coffee-shop, where his personality can’t dominate. Perhaps a few activities can be rescheduled so that you live a more balanced day etc.

**A Superb Way to Learn to Live Your Christian Identity**

The outline of the five steps leads me to a final “good news” moment. ***The Examen is a superb way to live in freedom.*** Creativity and freedom are hallmarks of human living in God’s Kingdom. The feeling that everything is decided, that fate has thrown us to the world, is a decidedly non-Christian perspective. Praying the Examen will open you to greater freedom and creativity because you will find you’re cooperating with God in daily life, the author of our freedom and creative power.

I dare you to pray it for a month; you’ll be changed by your experience. Then, if you’re up for it, read a good on the Examen such as Timothy Gallagher’s *The Examen Prayer.* You will have acquired a prayer pattern that, along with participating in corporate Eucharist, will open God’s presence in the world and in your life in a marvellous way.

1. Father Almighty, Creator of Heaven and Earth, establish your Kingdom among us. Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on me a sinner. Holy Spirit, Breath of God, renew me and all the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For those looking for a simplified (secularized?) version of this practice called “A Simple Ritual for Harried Managers (and Popes)” see the following link from *Harvard Business Review* http://bit.ly/WC9lyl [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Paul’s speech to the Athenians in Acts 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)