

What is the prayer of examen?

We aim to end our days with the evening prayer of examen. But what is that and how do we practice it? Here's a brief primer in the prayer of examen.

The prayer of examen emerged from the spiritual exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. The prayer is a practice of attentiveness to God and a request to ask God to show the meaning of our lives by showing us the meaning of a particular day - what did this day mean? In the examen, you review the events of the day and you attend to the emotional movements of your heart within those events - what did you feel in that conversation? How did you respond in that meeting at work? What we're after here is, what made us joyful, what brought us sorrow, what brought anger or disappointment. What brought you life? Where did you find energy and flow in your day? And where was energy and life drained?

The prayer of examen includes a few steps:

1) Inviting the Holy Spirit (a prayer for enlightenment):

You begin by coming into the awareness that you are in the presence of God, seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It is a recognition that we can't see ourselves truly without the gift of grace from God. The examen is not simply a matter of the natural power of our memory and analysis going back over the day. It is a matter of Spirit-guided insight into our life and a courageous and responsive sensitivity to God's call in our heart.

2) Praying in Thanksgiving:

We review our day with thanksgiving. This is important because if we've had a hard day, this is often the last thing we want to do. We'd rather complain to God but Ignatius' wisdom is don't start with the problems or worries since there's more than enough of those.

Start with particular attention to the goodness of God. Be specific - give thanks for the particular goodnesses of God to you. It's not vague generalities but particular thanks - how has God demonstrated his goodness to you in this day. We learn to respond to the demonstration of the love of God to us by giving thanks for the particular goodness of God to us.

In this, we are settling ourselves in the reality of God's love for us. We learn to respond to the demonstration of the love of God to us by giving thanks for the particular goodness of God to us.

So walk through your day in the presence of God and note its joys and delights. Focus on the day's gifts. Look at the work you did, the people you interacted with.

What did you receive from these people? What did you give them? Pay attention to small things—the food you ate, the sights you saw, and other seemingly small pleasures. God is in the details.

3) Review the day:

Take time to go through your day, now becoming aware of what was going on in our hearts. What has been happening to and in us this day? How has God been working in us? Ask the Holy Spirit to direct you to something during the day that God thinks is particularly important. It may involve a feeling—positive or negative.

Ignatius speaks of two heart experiences to be attentive to: consolation and desolation.

A consolation is an experience that causes you to feel fully alive, at peace, joyful, happy, comforted, loved, seen, whole, connected, your best self, and could be understood as an experience in which you feel close God.

A desolation is an experience that causes you to feel drained of energy, frustrated, irritated, angry, sad, unloved, sorrowful, alone, isolated, unaccepted, fragmented, less than your best self, and could be understood as an experience in which you feel far away from God.

4) Face the shortcomings of the day:

Take time to bring the desolations and shortcomings of the day to God. The tricky thing about desolation is that even though it is an uncomfortable and sometimes distressing experience and we may feel as if God is far away, God is still very near. So the gift is praying with the desolation, telling God about your experience and asking for God's grace in the experience.

Talk to God and listen. Reveal yourself and allow Jesus to speak into the quiet. Pray about it. Allow the prayer to arise spontaneously from your heart—whether intercession, praise, repentance, or gratitude.

5) Look toward tomorrow in hope:

We discern in hope and tomorrow is a new day. What did I learn today that I want to carry forward. And what is the strength or virtue that I need to go forward - ask the Lord for that ("Lord, I am running out of patience.") Ask God to give you light for tomorrow's challenges. What is the gift you need? Pray for hope.

Again, the habit we are aiming for in this practice is that of awareness of our self and alertness to the presence of God in our everyday lives, seeking to live in regular and responsive communion with God.