

WEEK TWO

Finding God in All Things

St. Ignatius believed that we can find God in all things, at every moment, even in the most ordinary times. To do this, we must take time to reflect on our experience, to look at the data of a day and discern their meaning.

Ignatius recommended a five-step method of prayer called the **Examen** to help us find God in all things. The Examen encourages us to look back over a period of time and pay attention to what is happening in and around us. Then we look ahead, to what comes next, so that we can act in a way worthy of our vocation as Christians.

These are the five steps of the Examen:

1. Pray for God's help.
2. Give thanks for the gifts of this day.
3. Pray over significant feelings.
4. Rejoice and seek forgiveness.
5. Look to tomorrow.

This week, we'll reflect on the steps of the Examen for five days. And for two days we will concentrate on listening to God.

Day One: Pray for God's Help

The Examen begins by opening your heart to God. You want to see with God's perspective, not your own. You may choose to make one or more of your prayer periods outside, soaking in the natural beauty of creation. Use all of your senses to experience the world. This week, as you walk the streets and go about your daily tasks, be attentive to the variety of God's creations, especially in the people you encounter.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: wonder at God's ongoing creation; gratitude for the gift of God creating me and creating the world.

Conversation with God

There is nothing magical about praying. Prayer is a conversation with God. So invite God to be with you during this sacred time. Ask God to help you be grateful and honest as you look back on the day. With God's help, be attentive to how the Spirit was working in and through you, others, and creation. Let yourself see your day as God sees it.

Read Psalm 121

Pray the psalm slowly. Open your heart to God. Consider: *What is God like? How can God help me?*

For Reflection

Lingering Over God

God's touch, though taking place in a moment of time, lives on within us forever. When we experience God's love, God's self-giving, we are never the same. We may return to some of our old ways of being and acting, but deep down within we are not the same.

We can continue to let an experience of God bear fruit within us by going back to it and lingering over it. Through this remembering, lingering, and reliving process, we open ourselves to God – we allow God to move within us, to touch our hearts again so that our own experiences of God ripple deep within us and can continue to make a difference in our lives.

– Maureen Conroy, *The Discerning Heart*

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Two: Give Thanks for the Gifts of This Day

The second step of the Examen is giving thanks. For Ignatius, gratitude is the first, most important step on the spiritual journey. An attitude of gratitude, practiced often enough, helps us find God in all things and can transform the way we look at our life and at other people.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: wonder at God's ongoing creation; gratitude for the gift of God creating me and creating the world.

Review the Day

Review the day and name the blessings, from the most significant and obvious to the more common and ordinary. God (*not* the devil) is found in the details, so be very specific! As you take stock, honor the gifts of others in your life, but don't forget to recognize the gifts in you, for they, too, are God given.

Don't feel that you must mechanically go through the day hour by hour or make a list of *all* the day's gifts. Instead, savor whatever gifts God shows you. With God's gentle guidance, *let the day go through you*.

Read Psalm 100

Read slowly and prayerfully. Ask yourself: *What am I thankful for?*

For Reflection

In his book, *A Simple, Life Changing Prayer*, Jim Manney summarizes the second step of the Examen this way: "**Give thanks.** The day I have just lived is a gift from God. Be grateful for it."

While one can never go wrong with gratitude, in the context of the Examen, gratitude is more than saying "thank you" in appreciation. Here are a few things to remember about gratitude in the Examen:

- **Its endpoint is always the greater glory of God (AMDG).** This is a gratitude steeped in the Ignatian concept of **magis** – gratitude and more. We are called to notice the gifts of our days in the context of the sacred.

- **It's relational.** Examen-gratitude takes place in the context of a specific relationship – the relationship between God and human. More specifically, it's the relationship between the Divine Lover and the beloved (us). It is a gratitude that presupposes God's continuous life-breath of love and our response to that love.
- **It demands presence.** Gratitude in the context of the Examen calls us to be attentive to the gifts that God has placed in our path over the past 24 hours. God knows what we need and enjoy. Perhaps that is warm sun on the face, gentle wind on the back, a compliment from a friend, encouragement from a co-worker, a warm cup of coffee, or all kinds of other good things. Yet, in our haste, we often miss these gifts that are right in front of us. The Examen calls us to presence so that we can recognize the gifts.
- **It encourages reflection.** Through the Examen, St. Ignatius invites us to take a step back every day and ask for the grace to see with new eyes. With God's help and our own reflective posture, we become more able to recognize the gifts.
- **It puts a stop to negative cycles.** In his wisdom, St. Ignatius recognized that certain thought patterns hold us back from recognizing God's gifts. How many times can we recall saying, "I will be happy when I reach this goal, finish this project, this or that situation changes, or when I'm a better person, better pray-er, etc."? This way of thinking leaves us feeling unsettled and unfulfilled. The Examen encourages us to focus on, and cultivate gratitude for, the blessings we have in the here-and-now.
- **It's not enough, but is enough.** When we become attentive to God's overwhelming generosity throughout our days, gratitude blossoms in our hearts. We realize that no amount of thanks would ever be sufficient to acknowledge the abundance of gifts that spring forth from God's love for us. And though we sense our own insufficiency, knowledge of this love gives rise to a true and satisfying joy and the sense that our gratitude is enough and *does* bring joy to the Giver.
- **It is hope-filled.** Most fundamentally, gratitude is the profound feeling that arises when we recognize and respond to the revelation that we are God's beloved. The Examen is a daily check-in – a conversation – with our Beloved that gives rise to a gratitude that propels us forward. Rooted in this loving relationship, we look forward in hope.

Daily practice of the Examen teaches us how to be open to and aware of God's continuous loving presence in our lives. It teaches us that God doesn't wait for us to finish everything or for everything to be perfect. God is present in the good times and the in-between times, in the imperfection, and *in the messes*—bestowing gifts on us every day. This recognition gives way to the gratitude of the Examen.

Journal

Journal your feelings, thoughts, or impressions.

Day Three: Pray Over Significant Feelings

In the third step of the Examen we look at our feelings. Ignatius believed that God communicates with us not only through mental insight but also through our “interior movements,” as he called them: our feelings, emotions, desires, attractions, repulsions, and moods. Feelings are neither positive nor negative: it is what you do with them that raises moral questions.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: wonder at God’s ongoing creation; gratitude for the gift of God creating me and creating the world.

Reflect on Your Feelings

As you reflect on the day, you may notice some strong feelings arise. They may be painful or pleasing – for example, joy, peace, sadness, anxiety, confusion, hope, compassion, regret, anger, confidence, jealousy, self-doubt, boredom, or excitement. Pick one or two strong feelings or movements and pray from them. Ask God to help you understand what aroused those feelings and where they led you:

Did they draw you closer to God? Did they help you grow in faith, hope, and love? Did they make you more generous with your time and talent? Did they make you feel more alive, whole, and human? Did they lead you to feel more connected to others or challenge you to life-giving growth?

Or did the feelings lead you away from God, make you less faithful, hopeful, and loving? Did they cause you to become more self-centered or anxious? Did they lure you into doubt and confusion? Did they lead to the breakdown of relationships?

Read Psalm 117

For Reflection

Ignatius’s Great Discovery

The point has often been made that the Christian Gospel is a story of strength and triumph arising from weakness and defeat. The Savior is a poor man in a provincial, backwater land. Salvation comes about through suffering and death. In the words of

Mary's Magnificat prayer: "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

We're afflicted with divided hearts that cause us to be burdened by angst, uncertainty, and fear when making important decisions. But this very confusion of thoughts and feelings is the place where we find God's footprints. It's the raw material for discernment.

This was Ignatius's great discovery.

—J. Michael Sparough, SJ; Jim Manney; Tim Hipskind, SJ, *What's Your Decision?*

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Day Four: Rejoice and Seek Forgiveness

The fourth step of the Examen is reflecting on what you can do better.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: wonder at God's ongoing creation; gratitude for the gift of God creating me and creating the world.

Closeness to God

Rejoice in those times that you were brought closer to God, and ask forgiveness for those times today when you resisted God's presence in your life. Praise God for the grace of awareness given to you during this time of prayer, even if you became aware of things you are not proud of. This awareness is the beginning of healing and conversion.

Read Psalm 51 (A Psalm of contrition)

Pray the Psalm slowly, in a spirit of confidence.

For Reflection

You did a marvel, Lord Jesus Christ, and make me feel beside myself in surprise. My spirit glistens with Your rising. I smile and smile with You. I am drowning in the laughter of Your friends. You have won, Lord, we know You have won! You have defeated all the worst that we could do, each alone and all together. You crushed the powers of darkness and of death to walk peacefully again in our flesh, now and forever. Come to me, great Lord of Life, as You come to all Your friends. Send me to console those around me who hurt. Come, and send Your friends into this daily world to labor full of hope for the Reign of God.

—Joseph A. Tetlow, SJ, *Choosing Christ in the World*

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Day Five: Look to Tomorrow

The Examen ends with a look at the day to come. Just as God is with you today, God will be with you as you sleep and when you wake up tomorrow. Invite God to be a part of your future. What do you need God's help with? Be very practical and specific. If it's helpful, look at your schedule for tomorrow. God wants to be there with you, in the most dramatic and mundane moments of your life. Ask God to give you the grace you need – for example, courage, confidence, wisdom, patience, determination, or peace. Or perhaps there is someone you would like to pray for by name.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following graces: wonder at God's ongoing creation; gratitude for the gift of God creating me and creating the world.

Read Luke 11:1-13

Invite God to be a part of your future. *What do you need God's help with?*

For Reflection

Our Examen teaches us, above all, to live in the present. Our days typically unfurl in frenzied preoccupation with the next meeting to attend, errands to be done, dinner to be prepared, and a hundred other tasks that crowd an efficient day. The monk Thich Nhat Hanh points out that we humans are great at planning and willing to sacrifice today to save for cars and houses tomorrow, "But we have difficulty remembering that we are alive in the present moment, the only moment there is for us to be alive." So he exhorts us to the Buddhist practice of mindfulness, being fully and consciously aware (or mindful) of the present moment. The Examen, by briefly pulling us out of our daily maelstrom, can help reorient us to the present. When we get it right, as Thich Nhat Hanh puts it, "Every breath we take, every step we make, can be filled with peace, joy, and serenity."

Learn from the past; envision the future; live in the present. It's a challenging life model to master, but the Examen helps us do so.

— Excerpted from *Heroic Living* by Chris Lowney

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Day Six: Do Not Be Afraid

Our reflections for the next two days focus on listening to God.

God is always trying to get our attention in ways both obvious and subtle. We are reminded of the prophet Elijah who, standing on a mountaintop, found God not in a mighty wind, or in an earthquake, or in fire, but in a “sound of sheer silence” (1 Kings 19:11-13). We can find God in the busyness of our lives and in the silence of our prayer.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following grace: a grateful awareness of the many ways in which God calls me.

Pray Luke 5:1-11

Listen to Jesus telling Simon Peter, and you, “Do not be afraid.” Ask: *Where do I experience God calling me in the midst of my daily life?*

For Reflection

A Poem by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, SJ

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*

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Day Seven: What Are You Looking For?

Only when we are really free can we hear God's call. We reflect on how God calls us right now in the concrete particulars of our lives. Do not worry about making big decisions or changing the way you live. That may come later. Instead, simply marvel that God calls each of us specially. Listen not only to the call but also to the One who calls.

We encounter God in a variety of ways: in the people around us and in the work we are doing; in something we read or see in the world; and in the inspiration of Scripture and the church's liturgy. We also find God in the holy desires brewing deep in our hearts. This is a central insight to Ignatian spirituality. Because God, our Creator, gives us life and because we are the image of God, God's desires and our deepest desires are one and the same. What we truly desire is also what God desires for us.

The Grace I Seek

I pray for the following grace: a grateful awareness of the many ways in which God calls me.

Read John 1:35-39

Listen to Jesus say to the disciples, and to you: "What are you looking for?" *How do you respond?*

For Reflection

Some Definite Service

I've already mentioned *The Ignatian Adventure* by Kevin O'Brien, SJ. Sprinkled throughout are prayers and poems. I really liked this one from John Henry Cardinal Newman [1801-1890].

God has created me to do Him some definite service; He has committed some work to me which He has not committed to another. I have my mission – I may never know it in this life, but I shall be told it in the next....I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good; I shall do His work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place, while not intending it, if I do but keep his Commandments.... Therefore I will trust Him. Whatever, wherever I am. I can never be thrown away.

*If I am in sickness, my sickness may serve Him; in perplexity, my perplexity may serve Him; in sorrow, my sorrow may serve Him....He does nothing in vain....
He knows what He is about.*

– Paul Brian Campbell, SJ

Journal

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