

Using the Examen

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The Examen. Everybody has their own way of doing it. I look at myself in my time. I'll tell you how men and women who keep up the Examen seem to go about it. Every night or every morning— however you like to do it—you take time to sit. You can do it very quickly or you can take your time. If you have to wait somewhere, that's one of the ways I do it. I spent 45 minutes waiting in an office today and I had plenty of time.

First of all, the five points of the Examen are still valid. You can say, "Well, we are going to divide directions up into this way, but you've still got left and right, up and down, forward and backwards." So the five points of Ignatius' Examen are there, and you are going to go through them if you make a real Examen even if you don't name them.

In our day you don't start by coming into God's presence, which is how you always began in Ignatius' prayer instructions. Today a prior effort has to be made. I have to become present to myself in God. In my culture I am constantly dragged away from myself. The phone, lights, emails, noise—everything is going on to drag me away from myself. So the first thing I have to do is come present to myself as an individual whom almighty God has chosen as his own. I belong to God and I have to become aware of that now and that means becoming aware of the gifts that God is giving to me and that's the first point of the Examen actually.

Never, never start examining yourself until you have thanked God for the gifts that God is giving to you—not in general, not in the past, but right now, today. That's how you start The Examen. I think people who can keep the Examen up often do that. I'll give you an interesting little point here that I learned from a very simple lady who was without much education. She had a wonderful way of talking about Jesus. When she was introduced to the Examen, she couldn't figure all that out so she said, "What I do, I tell God thank you for three things that came into my life. That's what I do, and then I go to sleep." I heard that and have been doing it ever since.

That's the first thing. I become present to myself in God and I thank God for the gifts that God is giving to me. On that basis I ask God that I can see in myself in what I have done, what I have said, what I have thought, what I feel at value, what really comes from his desiring and the way he has structured the world and myself and what comes merely from my life world. I ask to see that.

Now here's another obstacle. I'm not sure that I really want to see in absolute detail how much secularism has crept into my thinking. I want to tell you it's there. You don't go through serious studies in our secular world today especially at a university

level without absorbing a lot of values, perspectives and perceptions which are simply NOT Christ's. They are there, and I have to ask God please let me see what I am thinking, doing, being. So, that's the second thing.

Then the third thing is I just look at what happened today. That's one way of doing it. One person I know thinks, "How did I survive during the day?" That is her way of looking at it. She goes through things that challenged her and made her think. Another man is someone who can really plan his work and then work his plan. He goes right through the day. I would be asleep before lunch if I tried that. The way I usually do it is to see if there is something going on in my life. "What is the way my life is growing now?" Often it's a very holy thing; sometimes it's an unholy thing. So I look at that. What has been unfolding in my life?

A lot of times I don't have to take two seconds before I can see that I did something today or I omitted something today which I really regret. So, that is the third point really. One priest would ask God, "Would you please let me see the day the way the Holy Spirit witnessed it?" That is asking for a pretty authoritative approach to it, you know.

These various ways of looking at the day—I think a person goes through them doing it now one way and another day, another. Some people find the Examen hard or stop doing it because they are unwilling to change when they need to change in order to keep growing. So, that's the third thing.

All along you're really thinking that the Lord has been with me and everything I have done today God has done with me. Or to put it more humbly, "I did this with God." My view about sin now is that the best way for me to comprehend it today is to say, "that when I do something I know is really vile, if I say a really ugly thing to somebody, a stranger, and I'm not going to be able to take it back—if I do that, I

have made God say that with me." Well, no wonder God would get angry. I would get angry if somebody made me do something I didn't want to do. So, that is the fourth point that Ignatius brings out. I confess to the Lord, I protest to the Lord, "I did this and it was wrong and I regret it."

And then the last point is a very optimistic one, really. In the way I was taught as a novice (and that's a long time ago), it was a very mechanical approach. "Today I said a bad word five times; tomorrow, Lord, three. I'm going to try not to do it, but I'm not going to go beyond three." Well, I don't think that really helps us a lot anymore. I think what has to happen in the last point is we have to see that what we do responds to your question, "Why is it so hard to be authentic?"

And the fifth point is exactly that. "Lord, I know I am not a man who says vile things to strangers. I am ashamed of myself; I don't do that. So, what I'm going to do from now on is every time I get into a situation where a stranger is imposing on me, I'm going to ask myself, 'I wonder what's the matter; I wonder what's troubling them.'" In other words, I find something holy to do out of what God is creating in me in place of the unholy stuff that is in me from my culture.

So, that's how I look at it. How do I teach people to do this? You start by telling them they have to become present to themselves, holy in God's presence now.



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