THE EXAMEN PRAYER

St. Thérèse of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul*: “It was December 25, 1886, that I received the grace of leaving my childhood, in a word, the grace of my complete conversion. We had come back from Midnight Mass where I had the happiness of receiving the strong and powerful God. Upon arriving at Les Buissonnets, I used to love to take my shoes from the chimney corner and examine the presents in them; this old custom had given us so much joy in our youth that Céline wanted to continue treating me as a baby since I was the youngest in the family. Papa had always loved to see my happiness and listen to my cries of delight as I drew each surprise from the magic shoes, and my dear King’s gaiety increased my own happiness very much. However, Jesus desired to show me that I was to give up the defects of my childhood and so he withdrew its innocent pleasures. He permitted Papa, tired out after the Midnight Mass, to experience annoyance when seeing my shoes at the fireplace, and that he speak those words which pierced my heart: “Well, fortunately, this will be the last year!” I was going upstairs, at the time, to remove my hat, and Céline, knowing how sensitive I was and seeing the tears already glistening in my eyes, wanted to cry too, for she loved me very much and understood my grief. She said, “Oh, Thérèse, don’t go downstairs; it would cause you too much grief to look at your slippers right now!” But Thérèse was no longer the same; Jesus had changed her heart! Forcing back my tears, I descended the stairs rapidly; controlling the poundings of my heart, I took the slippers and placed them in front of Papa, and withdrew all the objects joyfully. I had the happy appearance of a Queen. Having regained his own cheerfulness, Papa was laughing; Céline believed it was a dream! Fortunately, it was a sweet reality; Thérèse had discovered once again the strength of soul which she had lost at the age of four and a half, and she was to preserve it forever!

On that night of light began the third period of my life, the most beautiful and the most filled with graces from heaven. The work I had been unable to do in ten years was done by Jesus in one instant, contenting himself with my good will which was never lacking.”

Patrick Ahern, *Maurice and Thérèse: The Story of a Love*, 72: “From that day to the end of her life, she never cried over trifles again. For most of us such an experience would pass and be forgotten. For Thérèse it was a “miracle” and was stamped upon her memory as the greatest grace of her life…."It was the grace of my complete conversion,” she wrote emphatically….In such ordinary ways her graces always came to her, without fanfare, in the routine of daily life.”

Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God*, First Conversation, *August 3, 1666*: “Today I saw Brother Lawrence for the first time. He told me: That God had granted him an exceptional grace in his conversion which took place, while he was still in the world, when he was eighteen. He told me that one day while looking at a tree stripped of its leaves, and reflecting that before long its leaves would appear anew, then its flowers and fruits would bloom, he received an insight into the providence and the power of God which was never erased from his soul; that this insight had completely detached him from the world, and gave him a love for God so great that it had not increased at all in the forty-odd years that had passed since he had received this grace.”
Bl. Pierre Favre, *Memoriale*: “On another occasion, when I arrived at the palace intending to listen to a sermon in the prince’s chapel, it happened that I was refused entry because I was unknown to the porter. So I remained there at the door for a while, remembering that I had often allowed various sinful thoughts and evil spirits to enter my soul while leaving Jesus with his words and his Spirit to knock and stand at the door. I also reflected on how Christ had been so ill received everywhere in the world. And I prayed that it be granted the porter and me not to stand and wait too long before the gates of paradise, undergoing purification. Many other thoughts, too, came to me in that place, causing me deep compunction of heart. So it happened that I came to love the porter all the more, he being the cause of my devotion.”

Jean Pierre de Caussade, S.J., *Abandonment to Divine Providence*: “The activity of God is everywhere and always present, but it is visible only to the eyes of faith. All creatures live in the hands of God. By our senses we can see only the action of the creature, but faith sees the Creator acting in all things. Faith sees that Jesus Christ lives in everything and works through all history to the end of time, that every fraction of a second, every atom of matter, contains a fragment of his hidden life and his secret activity. The actions of created beings are veils which hide the profound mysteries of the workings of God. After the Resurrection, Jesus Christ took the disciples unawares by his appearances, showing himself to them as if disguised and then appearing when he had revealed himself. And it is this same Jesus, ever living and ever active, who still surprises us if our faith is not strong and clear-sighted. There is never a moment when God does not come forward in the guise of some suffering or some duty, and all that takes place within us, around us and through us both includes and hides his activity. Yet, because it is invisible, we are always taken by surprise and do not recognize his operation until it has passed by us. If we could lift the veil and if we watched with vigilant attention, God would endlessly reveal himself to us and we should see and rejoice in his active presence in all that befalls us. At every event we should exclaim: ‘It is the Lord!’ (Jn 21:7). Nothing could happen to us without our accepting it as a gift from God.”

THE FIVE STEPS OF THE EXAMEN

Gratitude
Petition
Review
Forgiveness
Renewal
Step One: Gratitude

St. Ignatius: “It seems to me, in the light of the divine Goodness, though others may think differently, that ingratitude is one of the things most worthy of detestation before our Creator and Lord, and before all creatures capable of his divine and everlasting glory, out of all the evils and sins which can be imagined. For it is a failure to recognize the good things, the graces, and the gifts received. As such, it is the cause, beginning, and origin of all evils and sins. On the contrary, recognition and gratitude for the good things and gifts received is greatly loved and esteemed both in heaven and on earth.”

*Letter to Ines Pascual:* “We will much sooner tire of receiving his gifts than he of giving them.”

*Spiritual Exercises, 233, Contemplation to Gain Love:* “to ask for interior knowledge of so much good received, so that, entirely filled with gratitude, I may be able in all to love and serve his Divine Majesty.”

Jean is a woman of faith, a married woman with children in college. It is evening, the time when Jean is generally most able to review the day prayerfully, and she begins her examen. She lifts her heart to the Lord and, with the Lord, thinks back to the way the day began. Jean remembers how a remark her husband made at breakfast revealed to her that he was more worried than she had realized about a problem he would face at work this day. She quickly sensed that he needed her to listen as he put his concern into words, thinking the matter through and working toward his solution as he spoke. She knew that he rose from their breakfast gratefully, with a clearer mind, more ready to go to work. Now she thanks the Lord for the gift of that insight into her husband’s need that morning. She thanks the Lord for the gift of the greater clarity given to her husband through her listening, for the gift of her husband’s gratitude, and for the communication between them that had blessed the day as it began.

On her way to work, Jean stopped in the parish for mass. During the mass she presented her concerns to the Lord: her husband’s worries about his problem at work, relational tensions in her own workplace as well, and her daughter’s struggles with classes in college. The Gospel reading was the feeding of the five thousand (Mt 14: 13-21) and this Word of God spoke to her heart. She saw there a Jesus for whom the needs of the crowd mattered deeply, and who walked among them as healer: a Jesus who would not allow the people to depart hungry and in need. Her heart quietly lifted in strengthened hope that her needs too mattered to God, and that God would not leave her and her family without help. She left the church with new energy for the day. Now she remembers that moment of grace and, in gratitude, gives thanks to the Lord for nourishing her spiritually as the workday was about to begin.
Step Two: Petition

**Benjamin Franklin, Autobiography:** “It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into…. For this purpose I therefore contrived the following method [thirteen virtues, a week of focus on each]…. My intention being to acquire the habitude of all these virtues, I judged it would be well not to distract my attention by attempting the whole at once, but to fix it on one of them at a time; and, when I should be master of that, then to proceed to another, and so on, till I should have gone through the thirteen.”

Step Three: Review

**Spiritual Consolation: William Kernan, My Road to Certainty:** “I looked out of the train window to the California countryside which I was rapidly leaving behind me – the orange groves shimmering in the light of the late afternoon sun the little bungalows which appeared here and there for a moment and then were gone as the train sped on, and the mountains far out on the horizon…. An upsurge of gratitude swept through me and warmed my heart, and I thanked God for His Providence and goodness which had kept me all the days of my life and which, I was sure, would keep me safe forever. I could go on thinking of tomorrow in terms of today. Something would always be the same in every tomorrow; something would be certain – God.”

**Georges Vanier**, in Jean Vanier, *In Weakness Strength*: “This morning at the rue Cortambert Chapel, prayer was difficult. In spite of so many and fervent appeals to Christ’s love there was no feeling in me of response from the Beloved. I then turned to Our Blessed Lady and said something like this – ‘Please ask your Son to grant me the grace to love Him more and more. Do remind Him that He said to Margaret Mary “I thirst, I burn with the desire to be loved.” Well, I am here, I am a sinner but I want only to love Him. I thirst and burn with the desire to love Him…. If your Son wishes He can give me this love, please ask him’… This was said only a very few minutes before the end of the half hour which had been arid. Suddenly I felt a very sweet touch which warmed my whole being and stirred me to feelings of deep and moving gratitude to the Beloved and to His Mother.”

**St. Ignatius, Third Rule:** “The third is of spiritual consolation. I call it consolation when some interior movement is caused in the soul, through which the soul comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord, and, consequently when it can love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but only in the Creator of them all. Likewise when it sheds tears that move to love of its Lord, whether out of sorrow for one’s sins, or for the passion of Christ our Lord, or because of other things directly ordered to his service and praise. Finally, I call consolation every increase of hope, faith and charity, and all interior joy that calls and attracts to heavenly things and to the salvation of one’s soul, quieting it and giving it peace in its Creator and Lord.”
**Spiritual Desolation:** Alice is a dedicated woman of faith, active for years in her parish. Sharing the life of the parish is a source of spiritual strength for her and brings her joy in the Lord. More recently she has moved to a new town and joined the local parish. Here too Alice has sought involvement in the parish community but in her new setting has found this more difficult. A year passes amid struggles and she begins to question the value of her efforts.

“Alice sees herself as a pretty complete failure and feels altogether discouraged…. Recently, even in her own personal prayer, she has experienced feelings of emptiness, of being abandoned by God. She feels that God is no longer near and she becomes overwhelmed with frustration. She wonders if she isn’t altogether losing her faith in God’s loving care. She does continue to be faithful to community worship and to her personal times for prayer, but it all seems hopeless and meaningless.”

Walter ended the preceding day discouraged and tired. He found it hard to pray before retiring, and he did not feel the warmth of God’s presence as he prayed. He has long dedicated a half hour to prayer each morning before work; this morning as he rises, his heart is still discouraged and burdened. He begins his prayer as usual, but with the sense that his efforts will be in vain. The first few minutes of prayer are dry and distracted, and a feeling grows in him that the entire period of prayer will be fruitless. Walter finds himself considering simply ending the prayer.

**St. Ignatius, Fourth Rule:** “The fourth is of spiritual desolation. I call desolation all the contrary of the third rule, such as darkness of soul, disturbance in it, movement to low and earthly things, disquiet from various agitations and temptations, moving to lack of confidence, without hope, without love, finding oneself totally slothful, tepid, sad and, as if separated from one’s Creator and Lord. For just as consolation is contrary to desolation, in the same way the thoughts that come from consolation are contrary to the thoughts that come from desolation.”

Susan: Six months ago, Susan decided to attend daily mass as often as she could during the week. She found a church with a morning mass that allowed her ample time to get to work. Since then Susan makes her examen in church after the morning mass. She treasures this time of reviewing the preceding day with the Lord and of preparing spiritually for the day about to begin.

Today, as Susan sits in church after mass, alive to the Lord’s love and Eucharistic presence, she is aware of a serene sense of interior well-being. God’s love is very real for her at this moment. As she considers the spiritual joy she is feeling, Susan realizes that since she began attending daily mass she experiences this interior peace in the Lord more frequently than before, and that she has more patience and greater availability to others during the workday. She is grateful for the grace at work in her and is confirmed in the rightness of her decision to attend daily mass when possible.
Now Susan looks back over the preceding day. She remembers that the day did not begin well. God had seemed far away and she had felt little energy for spiritual things. Susan recalls how she almost decided to omit going to mass as planned; finally she did go, though she arrived late for the start of the mass. Susan recognizes here the enemy’s tactic of urging us to change our spiritual proposals in time of spiritual desolation and thanks God for the grace that enabled her – not without struggle – to maintain her proposal of attending mass as planned. She resolves to be watchful for similar deceptions of the enemy in the future and to resist them firmly in their beginnings.

Step Four: Forgiveness

George Herbert, “Love”:

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
Guilty of dust and sin.
But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
From my first entrance in,
Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning
If I lacked anything.

“A guest,” I answered, “worthy to be here”;
Love said, “You shall be he.”
“I, the unkind, ungrateful? Ah, my dear,
I cannot look on thee.”
Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
“Who made the eyes but I?”

“Truth, Lord; but I have marred them; let my shame
Go where it doth deserve.”
“And know you not,” says Love, “who bore the blame?”
“My dear, then I will serve.”
“You must sit down,” says Love, “and taste my meat.”
“So I did sit and eat.”

Step Five

Soren Kierkegaard, Gospel of Sufferings: “Faith means just that blessed unrest, deep and strong, which so urges the believer onward that he cannot settle at ease in this world…. For a believer cannot sit still, as a man might sit with a pilgrim’s staff in his hand; a believer journeys on.”

Flexibility

St. Ignatius, Spiritual Exercises, 76: “In the point where I am finding what I desire, there I will rest, without anxiety to move forward until I am satisfied.”
Conditions

The General Setting of the Examen

The Importance of the Setting
Spiritual Accompaniment
Examen and our Life of Prayer
Developing the Contemplative Capacity

The Specific Setting of the Examen

Beginning and Concluding the Examen
Entering the Prayer of Examen

St. Ignatius: “He would stand there and take off his hat; without stirring he would fix his eyes on the heavens for a short while. Then, sinking to his knees, he would make a lowly gesture of reverence to God. After that he would sit on a bench, for his body’s weakness did not permit him to do otherwise. There he was, head uncovered, tears trickling drop by drop, in such sweetness and silence, that no sob, no sigh, no noise, no movement of the body was noticed.”

Spiritual Exercises, 75: “A step or two before the place where I am about to contemplate or meditate, I will stand for the space of time it takes to say an Our Father, with my mind raised on high, considering how God our Lord looks upon me, etc., and make a gesture of reverence or humility.”

The Examen Prayer: “How does “God our Lord look upon me” as I begin to pray my examen? If, in Jesus, the unseen God is revealed to us (Jn 1:18), then we may rephrase this question as follows: how does Jesus look upon those who approach him with humble and sincere hearts? Jesus looks upon Nathaniel and that look tells Nathaniel that he is deeply known and loved; it is a look that changes his life (Jn 1:48). Jesus sees Levi and his look gives fresh meaning to Levi’s existence (Mk 2:14). Jesus sees a woman in tears and her tears are transformed into the joy of life restored (Lk 7:13). A man approaches Jesus and the Gospel tells us that “Jesus, looking at him, loved him” (Mk 10:21). Jesus sees a woman burdened for eighteen years with an illness; she is set free and sings God’s praises (Lk 13:12-13). Jesus looks upon Peter in his time of utter failure, a look that leads to tears and to renewal in a love that will never again be shaken (Lk 22:61).”

St. John of the Cross: “The look of God is love and the pouring out of gifts.”
Concluding the Prayer of Examen

“Where can I pray the examen?”

“Do I have time for the examen?”

Joseph Koterski, S.J.: “Saint Ignatius of Loyola recommends that we make it a daily prayer by reserving about ten to fifteen minutes at the close of each day, or at some other moment when we can steal a bit of quiet from our busy schedules.”

John Wickham, S.J.: “The examen prayer should be kept short (otherwise the pray-er will not persevere in it). It could take about ten minutes, and it should not go longer than fifteen minutes.”

The Examen Prayer: “One further specific question regarding time is worthy of note: is the last moment of the day the best time for the examen? For some of us, it may be. For some, in fact, this may be the only real opportunity to pray the examen. Others may find the examen more effective when prayed earlier in the evening or in the day, and so when tiredness is less of a distraction. As always, experience and reflection upon our experience will bring clarity.”

Journaling and the Examen

Periodic Renewal in the Examen

Courage

A woman writes: “I feel now as if I was wandering through a jungle before I began the examen, and was wide open to every negative thought which could pretty freely take hold of me, since I wasn’t paying attention. It was only when those thoughts got dark enough and consuming enough that I noticed that something was very wrong. But even then, I felt helpless to stop what was happening since I wasn’t at all clear what it was….

My “after” experience, that is, of making the examen daily, has let me see the problem much more clearly for what it is. The simple question of asking if certain thoughts or patterns of acting are leading me toward God or away from him is like shining a light into a dark room – one sees all sorts of things for what they are. The other thing it has let me see is “early warning signals” – the blindness to which got me into trouble in the first place…. I am very, very grateful that the Lord has been so patient, that he has given me such clear helps along the way, and that he has shown me so clearly what I need to do.”

The Fruit of the Examen Prayer

A woman: “The examen is like a mini-retreat. It helps me to remember what is important. It helps me to get my priorities realigned. Through the examen, I remember the important things: that I’m loveable, that God loves me, that God loved me into creation. I remember the whole point of why I’m here: for God’s, my own, and others’ happiness. Then I can act out of this awareness during the day.”
A married woman: “Without the examen I don’t know if I’d be able to grow spiritually very easily. This is where I’m aware of how I’m responding to what’s going on in my life. If I’m not responding well, I look to see why. If I feel sad, I try to see why. Through the examen, I notice patterns and trends in my life. Without the examen, I would just be reacting and not responding throughout the day.”

An Outline of the Examen

**Transition:** I become aware of the love with which God looks upon me as I begin this examen.

**Step One: Gratitude.** I note the gifts that God’s love has given me this day and I give thanks to God for them.

**Step Two: Petition.** I ask God for an insight and a strength that will make this examen a work of grace, fruitful beyond my human capacity alone.

**Step Three: Review.** With my God, I review the day. I look for the stirrings in my heart and the thoughts which God has given me this day. I look also for those which have not been of God. I review my choices in response to both, and throughout the day in general.

**Step Four: Forgiveness.** I ask for the healing touch of the forgiving God who, with love and respect for me, removes my heart’s burdens.

**Step Five: Renewal.** I look to the following day and, with God, plan concretely how to live it in accord with God’s loving desire for my life.

**Transition:** Aware of God’s presence with me, I prayerfully conclude the examen.