



REIMAGINING THE IGNATIAN EXAMEN

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THE IGNATIAN
EXAMEN

Fresh Ways to Pray
from Your Day

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The Most Amazing Prayer You've Never Heard Of

One of the greatest mystics of all time, St. Ignatius of Loyola, believed that the prayer exercise called the “Examen” should be the *most important quarter-of-an-hour of a person's day*, and yet today most Christians have never even heard of it.

Why is the Examen so valuable?

St. Paul exhorts us to “pray without

ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17). I’ve learned that the closer I get to Christ, the more I really long to be with him always. It’s not that I desire to be kneeling in a church or sitting in my comfy prayer-chair all day. I love the buzz of my life—the endeavor of human activity—too much to be sitting in contemplation all the time. No, what I long for is to have Christ join me in all the adventures and tedium of my active day. I love Christ so much that I want to share every minute of it with him.

My faith tells me that God is everywhere at all times, and that Christ is in my heart and embedded in all of creation—regardless of how conscious I am of his presence at

any given moment. That's wonderfully consoling, but I want more! I want to *feel* his presence all the time. I want to feel him not only when I leave the nitty-gritty of my life and go to church; I want to feel his presence always! And I want to share with him even the smallest details of my life: the irritating e-mail I just received and the pleasant smile of the woman at the post office; the dread in my heart for the difficult meeting I'm about to step into and also the delight of biting into that perfectly sweet and crunchy apple during my break. I want to talk to Christ about the stupid thing I just said to my boss and also the little victory I had in getting that boring multiday task completed.

Sure, I want to share with Christ the really big things: my grave sins and my overwhelming consolations, and I will share those big things during my daily meditation and when I go to Mass or confession. But the closer I grow to Christ, the more I want to share with him the seemingly insignificant things as well. I know that he's there, in the midst of it all, and I long to tap into his presence right there in the mud and muck, the pencils and French fries of my complicated yet incredibly ordinary life.

This is why the Examen is so awesome and powerful. It brings my nitty-gritty to God and God to my nitty-gritty.

I could go on and on about how wonderful the Examen is. I could tell you:

- how it unites me ever closer to God
- how it reveals God's perspective on my everyday life
- how it stirs me to give praise and thanksgiving for the countless gifts of God that have popped up in my day, and even to perceive the very presence of God in those gifts
- how it gives me an opportunity to recognize and apologize for my faults, and to grieve my failures

and hurts and receive healing from them

- how it brings insight into what is really going on beneath the surface of my thoughts, words, and actions—into the very source of my motivations and machinations
- how it helps me discern how to handle the trickier aspects of my life, to know what interior gifts I need from God to do the right thing tomorrow, and to ask God for those gifts explicitly

I could provide pages of details about all these unbelievable benefits I receive from praying this brief prayer every

day. But why waste another minute *reading* about the benefits when you can reap them for yourself? You'll know just what I'm talking about as soon as you try it.

What Is the Ignatian Examen?

Saint Ignatius of Loyola created the Examen to be a very short (“quarter of an hour”) twice-daily prayer that can be prayed at any time that is most convenient. Most people enjoy praying the Examen during their lunch break and in the evening as they are winding down. At lunchtime, you look back at how your morning has gone and look forward to how your afternoon and evening might go. In the evening, you

look back over your afternoon (since your lunchtime Examen) and look forward to how tomorrow morning might go. If you are new to the Examen, you may find it easier to start by praying it only once a day.¹

In the Examen, we review our recent past to find God and God's blessings in daily life. We also look back to find moments in the day when things didn't go so well—when we were hurt by something that happened to us, or when we sinned or made a mistake. We give praise and thanksgiving for the blessed moments. We ask forgiveness and healing for the difficult and painful moments. Having reflected on this past day, we then turn to the day yet to come

and ask God to show us the potential challenges and opportunities of tomorrow. We try to anticipate which moments might go one way or the other for us: toward God's plan or away from it. We ask for insight into what graces we might need to live this next day well: patience, wisdom, fortitude, self-knowledge, peace, optimism. We ask God for that grace, and we trust that he wants us to succeed in our day even more than we do.

That's the basic idea behind the Ignatian Examen. Ignatius would say that this should be the most important moment of our day. Why? Because this moment affects every other moment.

Specifically, How Do You Do the Examen?

Ignatius provides a simple five-step routine for our daily Examen:

Give thanksgiving. I begin by giving God thanks for all the things I'm grateful for today. I allow my mind to wander as I reflect on the ways God has blessed me on this particular day. I allow big things and small things to arise—everything from the gift of my faith, to the gift of my marriage, to the easy commute to work today.

Ask for the Spirit. Next, I want to look at the moments in my day when I did not act so well. However, before doing so, I ask God to fill me with his

Spirit so that the Spirit can lead me through this difficult soul-searching. Otherwise, I'm liable to hide in denial, wallow in self-pity, or seethe in self-loathing.

Review and recognize failures. I look back at my day and ask the Lord to point out to me the moments when I have failed in big ways or small. I take a sobering look at the mistakes I've made this day.

Ask for forgiveness and healing. If I have sinned, I ask God to forgive me and set me straight again. If I have not sinned but simply made a mistake, I ask for healing of any harm that might have been done. I ask for help to get over it and move on. I also ask for

wisdom to discern how I might better handle such tricky moments in the future.

Pray about the next day. I ask God to show me how tomorrow might go. I imagine the things I'll be doing, the people I'll see, and the decisions I'll be mulling over. I ask for help with any moments I foresee that might be difficult. I especially ask for help in moments when I might be tempted to fail in the way I did today.

To help me remember the five steps, I like to use a 5-Rs mnemonic: