

# The Examen of Consciousness

This is a prayer in the Ignatian tradition where we try to find the movement of the Spirit in our daily lives as we reflect on our day. This prayer can be made anywhere: on the beach, in a car, at home, in the library. Many people make the Examen twice daily: once around lunchtime and again before going to bed. There are five simple steps to the Examen, which should take 10-15 minutes to complete, and what follows is just one interpretation of these five steps in discerning the movement of God's Spirit in your day. Through this method of praying you can grow in a sense of self and the Source of self; you can become more sensitive to your own spirit with its longings, its powers, its Source; you will develop an openness to receive the supports that God offers.

Before you start: Try to be in a place where you are least likely to be disturbed, and where there is the least amount of external noise. Perhaps you might light a candle or change the lighting when you pray to symbolize the start of this activity. Sit comfortably and still yourself; relax, be aware of your breathing, your body and how you are feeling.

**1. Recall that you are in the presence of God.** No matter where you are, hilltop or valley, country or city, in a crowd or alone, you are a creature in the midst of creation. As you quiet yourself, become aware that God is present within you, in the creation that surrounds you, in your body, in those around you. The Creator who brought you forth into being is concerned for you. The Spirit of God, sent by Christ, will remind you that you are gifted to help bring creation to its fullness. Ask the Holy Spirit to let you look on all you see with love. "Love is patient, love is kind, love is not jealous or boastful, it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way; ... it does not rejoice at wrong but rejoices in the right ... Love hopes all things." (1 Cor.)

**2. Spend a moment looking over your day with gratitude for this day's gifts.** Be concrete and let special moments or pleasures spring to mind! Recall the smell of your morning coffee, the taste of something good that you ate, the laugh of a child, the fragrance of a flower, the smile brought forth by a kind word, a lesson that you learned. Take stock of what you received and what you gave. Give thanks to God for favors received. Also look at your permanent gifts that allow your participation in this day. Recall your particular strengths in times of difficulty, your ability to hope in times of weakness, your sense of humor and your life of faith, your intelligence and health, your family and friends. God the Father gives you these to draw you into the fullness of life. As you move through the details of your day, give thanks to God for His presence in the big and the small things of your life.

**3. Ask God to send you His Holy Spirit to help you look at your actions and attitudes and motives with honesty and patience.** "When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth." (John 16:13) The Holy Spirit inspires you to see with growing freedom the development of your life story. The Spirit gives a freedom to look upon yourself without condemnation and without complacency and thus be open to growth. Ask that you will learn and grow as you reflect, thus deepening your knowledge of self and your relationship with God.

**4. Now review your day.** This is the longest of the steps. Recall the events of your day; explore the context of your actions. Search for the internal movements of your heart and your interaction with what was before you. Ask what you were involved in and who you were with, and review your hopes and hesitations. Many situations will show that your heart was divided—wavering between helping and disregarding, scoffing and encouraging, listening and ignoring, rebuking and forgiving, speaking and silence, neglecting and thanking. Remember, this is not a time to dwell on your shortcomings; rather, it is a gentle look with the Lord at how you have responded to God's gifts. It is an opportunity for growth of self and deepening your relationship with God. Notice where you acted freely—picking a particular course of action from the possibilities you saw. See where you were swept along without freedom. What reactions helped or hindered you? See where Christ entered your decisions and where you might have paused to receive His influence. "Test yourselves," St. Paul urges, "to see whether you are living in faith; examine yourselves. Perhaps you yourselves do not realize that Christ Jesus is in you." (2 Cor.) His influence comes through His people, the Body of Christ. His influence comes through Scripture, the Word of God. Now, as you pray, Christ's spirit will help you know His presence and concern. As you daily and prayerfully explore the mystery of yourself in the midst of your actions you will grow more familiar with your own spirit and become more aware of the promptings of God's Spirit within you. Allow God to speak, challenge, encourage and teach you. Thus you will come to know that Christ is with you. Christ will continually invite you to love your neighbor as yourself and strengthen you to do this.

**5. The final step is our heart-to-heart talk with Jesus.** Here you speak with Jesus about your day. You share your thoughts on your actions, attitudes, feelings and interactions. Perhaps during this time you may feel led to seek forgiveness, ask for direction, share a concern, express gratitude, etc. Having reviewed this day of your life, look upon yourself with compassion and see your need for God and try to realize God's manifestations of concern for you. Express sorrow for sin, the obscuring darkness that surrounds us all, and especially ask forgiveness for the times you resisted God's light today. Give thanks for grace, the enlightening presence of God, and especially praise God for the times you responded in ways that allowed you to better see God's life. Resolve with Jesus to move forward in action where appropriate. You might like to finish your time with the Lord's Prayer.

Once you've done the Examen a few times, you will find your own rhythm and method. Cover all five points daily with freedom to dwell more on one than another, as the Spirit moves you. You might also like to add some music, candles or images to help you pray.