

The Ignatian Examen

By Josh Cook In the past few years there has been a huge resurgence of interest in ancient prayer practices. While these exercises never really went away (they have been staples in the prayer lives of many believers for centuries), their emphasis on silence and listening seems to resonate deeply with the modern Christian.

Of all of the spiritual exercises that I've tried, the Ignatian Examen has become, by far, the most integrated into my daily life. This prayer practice was originated by Ignatius of Loyola, author of Spiritual Exercises and founding member of the Jesuits.

So what is the Examen? At its most basic level, it is a prayerful examination of your day. The idea is that, at the end of each day, you set aside a few minutes to reflect on that day's happenings, trusting that God will reveal all sorts of cool things to you (more on that later).

It can be broken down to the following essential steps.

1. Invite God - Like all spiritual exercises, the Examen relies on the presence of God. Ask God to walk with you and show you what He wants you to see. This is, in my estimation, the most important step.

2. Review - This is the real meat of the exercise. There are a lot of ways you can frame your reflection, but generally you review your day twice, focusing on, as Ignatius puts it, moments of consolation and moments of desolation. Here are some questions you can ask yourself to find these moments:

- When was I present to God? When did I neglect God?
- When did I respond to God's voice? When did I ignore it?
- When did God feel present? When did God feel absent?
- When was I compelled by God? When was I compelled by evil?
- For what am I most grateful? For what am I least grateful?
- When did I notice the work of God? When did I ignore it?

It doesn't matter what question you ask, or if you ask a question at all. The point is that you allow God to show you what He wants you to see. Remember that you're not looking for anything, you're waiting on God to show you something. The difference is subtle, but crucial.

3. Thank God - Ignatius viewed the Examen as "a gift," and any revelations should be treated as such. Take a few moments to thank God for the sacred time you shared with Him, whether the experience was comforting, unsettling or even uneventful. It is tempting to rush through this step, but its just as important as the others. Remember, the entire

exercise relies on the presence and activity of God.

Two optional steps:

4. Journal - This is a personal favorite of mine. It helps to articulate clearly what I'm thinking. It also serves as a reminder of past sessions. I've found it to be particularly useful at finding trends in my life. If, for example, I review my journal and see that I've written "Ignored my friends" in the Desolation column several days in a row, it is probably time to give my friends a call.

5. Act - I believe that when you enter the presence of God, you should come out changed. What good is reflection if it doesn't lead to transformation and action. Try writing down a few simple actions you can take in response to your discoveries.

As a youth worker, incorporating the Examen into my daily routine has been vital to my spiritual health. A few months ago I was in a really difficult season in my ministry. I was discouraged and, to be honest, feeling pretty sorry for myself. I remember one night I opened my journal to flip through notes from my past Examen sessions, and I was shocked to see that the "Consolation" entries consistently dwarfed the "Desolation" entries. Even when I thought I was overwhelmed by troubles, God was, in fact, blessing me many times over. I never would have had that sense of perspective had it not been for the Examen.

If you're feeling burned out, overwhelmed or spiritually exhausted, the Examen may be exactly what you need. Give it a shot, and I pray that it will be as transformative for you as it has been for me.

Don't miss next time when I'll talk about teaching the Examen to your students, followed by part 3, in which I'll take a few creative liberties with the Examen and apply it to some unlikely situations!