



The Biblical phrase, “If today you hear his voice,” implies that the divine voice must somehow be accessible in our daily experience, for this verse expresses a conviction central to Hebrew and Christian faith, that we live a life in dialogue with God. We are creatures who live one day at a time. If God wants to communicate with us, it has to happen in the course of a 24-hour day, for we live in no other time. And how do we go about this kind of listening? Long tradition has provided a helpful tool, which we call the examination of consciousness today. “Rummaging for God” is an expression that suggests going through a drawer full of stuff, feeling around, looking for something that you are sure must be in there somewhere. I think that image catches some of the feel of what is classically known in church language as the prayer of “examen.”

The examen, or examination, of conscience is an ancient practice in the church. In fact, even before Christianity, the Pythagoreans and the Stoics promoted a version of the practice. It is what most of us Catholics were taught to do to prepare for confession. In that form, the examen was a matter of examining one’s life in terms of the Ten Commandments to see how daily behaviour stacked up against those divine criteria. St. Ignatius includes it as one of the exercises in his manual, *The Spiritual Exercises*.

It is still a salutary thing to do but wears thin as a lifelong, daily practice. It is hard to motivate yourself to keep searching your experience for how you sinned. In recent decades, spiritual writers have worked with the implication that conscience in Romance languages like French (*conscience*) and Spanish (*conciencia*) means more than our English word “conscience,” in the sense of moral awareness and judgment; it also means “consciousness.”

Now prayer that deals with the full contents of your consciousness lets you cast your net much more broadly than prayer that limits itself to the contents of conscience, or moral awareness. A number of people—most famously, George Aschenbrenner, S.J., in a classic article for *Review for Religious* in 1971—have developed this idea in profoundly practical ways. I wish to propose a way of doing the examen, as an approach in five steps:

1. Pray for light. Since we are not simply daydreaming or reminiscing but rather looking for some sense of how the Spirit of God is leading us, it only makes sense to pray for some illumination. The goal is not simply memory but graced understanding. That’s a gift from God devoutly to be begged. “Lord, help me understand this blooming, buzzing confusion.”
2. Review the day in thanksgiving. Note how different this

is from looking immediately for your sins. Nobody likes to poke around in the memory bank to uncover smallness, weakness, lack of generosity. But everybody likes to savour beautiful gifts, and that is precisely what the past 24 hours contain—gifts of existence, work, relationships, food, challenges. Gratitude is the foundation of our whole relationship with God. So use whatever cues help you to walk through the day from the moment of awakening—even the dreams you recall upon awakening. Walk through the past 24 hours, from hour to hour, from place to place, task to task, person to person, thanking the Lord for every gift you encounter.

3. Review the feelings that surface in the replay of the day. Our feelings, positive and negative, the painful and the pleasing, are clear signals of where the action was during the day. Simply pay attention to any and all of those feelings as they surface, the whole range: delight, boredom, fear, anticipation, resentment, anger, peace, contentment, impatience, desire, hope, regret, shame, uncertainty, compassion, disgust, gratitude, pride, rage, doubt, confidence, admiration, shyness—whatever was there. Some of us may be hesitant to focus on feelings in this over psychologized age, but I believe that these feelings are the liveliest index to what is happening in our lives. This leads us to the fourth moment.

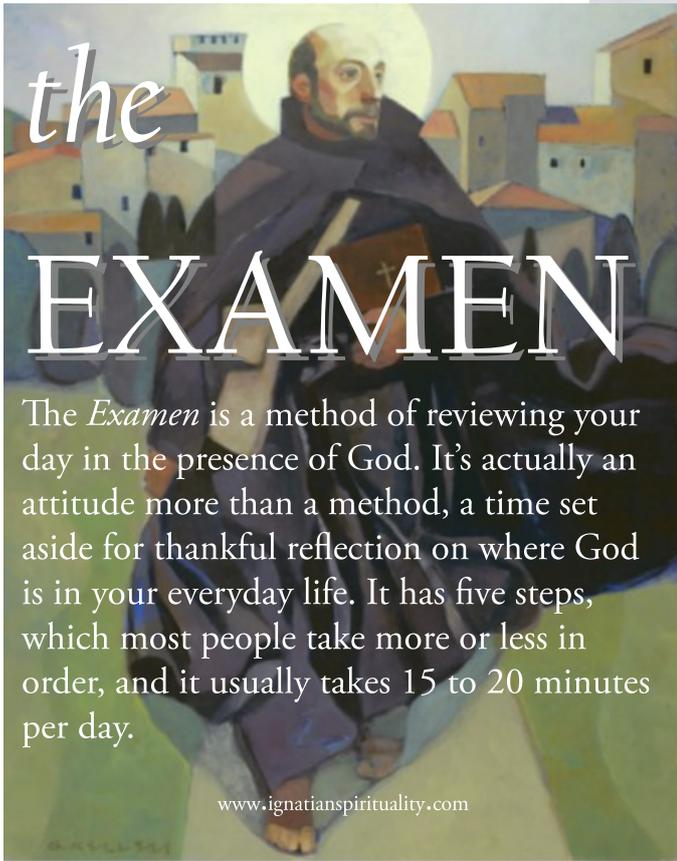
4. Choose one of those feelings (positive or negative) and pray from it. That is, choose the remembered feeling that most caught your attention. The feeling is a sign that something important was going on. Now simply express spontaneously the prayer that surfaces as you attend to the source of the feeling—praise, petition, contrition, cry for help or healing, whatever.

5. Look toward tomorrow. Using your appointment calendar if that helps, face your immediate future. What feelings surface as you look at the tasks, meetings, and appointments that face you? Fear? Delighted anticipation? Self-doubt? Temptation to procrastinate? Zestful planning? Regret? Weakness? Whatever it is, turn it into prayer—for help, for healing, whatever comes spontaneously. To round off the examen, say the Lord’s Prayer.

If we are to listen for the God who creates and sustains us, we need to take seriously and prayerfully the meeting between the creatures we are and all else that God holds lovingly in existence. That “interface” is the felt experience of our days. It deserves prayerful attention. It is a big part of how we know and respond to God.

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the “Examen” at a glance...



the
EXAMEN

The *Examen* is a method of reviewing your day in the presence of God. It’s actually an attitude more than a method, a time set aside for thankful reflection on where God is in your everyday life. It has five steps, which most people take more or less in order, and it usually takes 15 to 20 minutes per day.

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Here it is in a nutshell:

- 1. Ask God for light.**
I want to look at my day with God’s eyes, not merely my own.
- 2. Give thanks.**
The day I have just lived is a gift from God. Be grateful for it.
- 3. Review the day.**
I carefully look back on the day just completed, being guided by the Holy Spirit.
- 4. Face your shortcomings.**
I face up to what is wrong—in my life and in me.
- 5. Look toward the day to come.**
I ask where I need God in the day to come.

Version of the Examen from A Simple, Life-Changing Prayer by Jim Manney © Loyola Press

The Daily Examen

The examen, or examination of conscience, is a quick prayer to help you see where God was active in your day. Usually done for 15 to 20 minutes at the end of a day, the prayer was popularized by St. Ignatius Loyola in his classic text *The Spiritual Exercises*. Use these five easy steps to pray the examen every day, and soon you’ll begin to notice God’s presence more easily.

- 1. Presence:** Remember that you’re in the presence of God in a special way when you pray. Ask God for help in prayer.
- 2. Gratitude:** Recall two or three things that happened today for which you are especially grateful. Savor them. Then thank God for these gifts.
- 3. Review:** Review your day from start to finish, noticing where you experienced God’s presence. Notice everything from large to small: from an enjoyable interaction with a friend to the feel of the sun on your face. When did you love? When were you loved?
- 4. Sorrow:** You may have sinned today or done something you regret. Express your sorrow to God and ask for forgiveness. If it’s a grave sin, pray about seeking forgiveness from the person offended, or the sacrament of reconciliation.
- 5. Grace:** You may want to return to a meaningful part of your prayer and speak to God about how you felt. At the close of the prayer, ask for God’s grace for the following day.

Over time, as you pray the examen, you’ll notice God’s presence in the moment, rather than just at the end of the day. You’ll see that your whole day can be a kind of prayer. Soon you’ll discover that you’ve become, as Jesuits like to say, a “contemplative in action.” James Martin, S.J.