

A Time of Wilderness

Spiritual Reflections during Lockdown, #3

The Examen

During this period of Lockdown I've been experimenting with different ways of praying and connecting my day-to-day life (in which the small things seem to increasingly matter) with my relationship with God. One thing that I've found helpful is practising the Examen at the end of the day, so I thought I'd make it the subject of this week's reflection in case you find it helpful too.

The Examen originates from *The Spiritual Exercises*, a sixteenth century book of contemplations, meditations and prayers written by Ignatius of Loyola.

Essentially the Examen is very simple. It is about asking yourself, usually at the end of the day, two questions: For what am I most grateful for today? For what am I least grateful? These questions help us to identify moments of consolation and desolation. They have a way of highlighting the value of the small moments in life which can otherwise easily pass us by. Ignatius believed that God is continually revealed in our experiences, and so for him the Examen was the cornerstone of spiritual life. For centuries prayerful people have found direction for their day and for their life by identifying these moments. One theologian has likened it to 'rummaging for God'!

The Examen can be particularly valuable when times are difficult because it helps us to focus in a prayerful way on the things, however small, which have been positive and life-giving in our day, and pause to be grateful for them in God's presence. It can also help with what we find difficult, reminding us of how God speaks to us even through moments which are painful and sad.

The Process:

There is no 'right' way, but this might be a helpful approach: Perhaps light a candle to remind you of God's presence and help you focus. The flame represents the light of divine revelation in our everyday experience. Make sure you are comfortable and take some deep breaths. Let yourself become aware of God's presence. As you ask yourself the two questions, review your day with gratitude. Try to make note of your emotions. Choose two moments of the day in response to the questions and pray from them. Finish by looking with hope toward tomorrow. The Examen can be done on your own, as private prayer and contemplation, or with others, as a way to reflect in a prayerful way on your day together. Its simplicity means it works well for children as well as adults.

Over time, patterns can form through repeating the Examen which remind us of what is really important in our lives and what we need to give more focus too, along with what troubles us and why. As well as helping us find God's presence in the everyday, it can help give us direction as we look with hope to the future.

Ideas for prayer

Here are some more examples of how you could approach the Examen questions: For what moment today am I most grateful? For what moment today am I least grateful? When did I feel most alive today? When did I feel life draining out of me? When today did I feel the greatest sense of belonging to myself, God and creation? When did I feel the least sense of belonging?

