A daily examen for children and teens

A daily examen (or an examen of consciousness) is a prayerful method of "checking in" on how well we are living out our Christian faith on a daily basis. Developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola more than four hundred years ago, the Examen invites us to reflect on how God has been present in our day, how we have responded to that presence, and how we might grow in holiness. Note that the examen is different from an examination of conscience, the practice of reviewing the health of your spiritual life before receiving the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

A Tool for Spiritual Growth

Helping your kids develop the habit of making a daily examen gives them a powerful tool for spiritual growth. Why? Because it not only teaches kids that God is near, present in every moment of their lives, but helps them recognize the many manifestations of that presence. Moreover, it teaches kids to examine their own response to God's presence, for better or worse, in their thoughts, feelings, and actions. And finally, it teaches them to make this examination in a spirit of gratitude.

With the aid of the Holy Spirit, this prayerful examination draws us ever closer to God. No wonder St. Ignatius so highly recommended it—not just for his Jesuits, but for everyone!

Older Children and Teens

Try the traditional form of the examen during family prayer with older children and teens, setting aside ten to fifteen minutes to do it well. What follows is a simple outline; you can find more detailed versions using the resources below.

Consider lighting a candle or playing quiet music to set a prayerful atmosphere. Briefly describe each step, allowing several minutes for each one.

1. Enter God's presence. Take a few moments to quiet down, to recall that God has accompanied you every step of the way during the day, and to open yourself to God's presence.

2. Review the events of the day in a spirit of gratitude. Move through your day, hour by hour, taking special note of its many small gifts: the warmth of a child's hand, a cup of coffee, a flock of birds, the kindness of a stranger. Recall that God is revealed in each of these details. Think, too, about the gifts you were able to give others: an encouraging word, a smile, work well done.

3. Pray for a "Spirit of truth." Prepare for the next step by asking for the "Spirit of truth" to "guide you into all truth" (John 16:13). Prepare yourself to be honest as you examine your actions during the day, knowing that the truth will free you to grow closer to God. Recall, too, God's unconditional love for you.

4. How were you open to God's presence in the events of the day? Next, examine how you responded (or didn't) to God's presence in the key events of the day. When were you loving? When did you miss an opportunity to love? When were you sinful? How much were you in charge of your actions, and what did you do out of simple habit? Pay attention to your emotions around these events. St. Ignatius taught that the Holy Spirit often speaks to us through our emotions, even the "negative" ones. What truth might God be leading you to through your emotions?

5. Bring it to Jesus. Finally, respond in prayer to the insights revealed in the previous steps. You may want to imagine this as a friendly face-to-face meeting with Jesus, one in which you offer words of sorrow, gratitude, or joy. You

may want to ask for forgiveness, consolation, encouragement, the grace to overcome bad habits, and direction for how to grow closer to God. Continue to listen to Jesus as you resume your daily activities.

Younger Children

Introduce very young children to the idea of reviewing the day and bringing it to God by doing talking about the highs and lows (see below) of the day. For children ages 5–9, try talking through the steps conversationally using this shortened method:

1. Entering God's presence. Set a prayerful tone (see Smells and Bells for some ideas). "Let's pray about our day." Make the Sign of the Cross. "God, you have been with us all day long, since the time we woke up until now; help us to remember our day, so we can bring it to you."

2. What happened today? Review the events of the day, moving through the parts of the day and offering prompts as necessary. "What happened in the morning when we woke up? . . . What happened at school? . . . When we got home? . . . When were we angry? . . . Sad? . . . Happy? . . . What was beautiful? . . . What was amazing?" Optionally, write down responses on a dry erase board or in a prayer journal.

3. How was God present, and how did we respond? "How was God present to us today?" You will probably need to name this for your children at first, or supplement their responses with your own suggestions. It might be obvious that God is present in moments of beauty and joy, but you can help your children see how God is also present during times of challenge and sadness. Ask, "How did we respond to God's presence? When were we loving? When weren't we loving?"

4. Pray the day. Invite your children to think about what Jesus is saying to them through the events of the day. Ask guiding questions such as, "What do you think Jesus says about

our day?” Invite them to pray in response: “What do we want to tell Jesus about what happened today?” Encourage simple words of praise, thankfulness, repentance, forgiveness, and petitions for the grace to draw closer to God in the coming day. Close with the Sign of the Cross.

Highs and Lows

A simple way to prepare young children for a lengthier, more involved examen is to begin with a daily “highs and lows” check-in. The whole family can participate!

At the end of the day (perhaps over dinner), have each person share their “highs” and “lows” for the day: What was the best thing that happened today? What was the worst? As each person shares his or her highs and lows, have another person offer a prayer for whatever that person mentioned.

Explain that we can give the events of our days back to God in prayer. We can give the “highs” back to God in the form of our joy and thanks, and we can give the lows back to God by “offering them up”—that is, uniting our suffering (no matter how small) with the suffering of Christ on the cross, so that God might take our suffering and turn it into something good, just as he did in the Resurrection.

Say a simple prayer such as the Our Father or a spontaneous prayer of your own, or sing a song, as a way of offering your highs and lows to God.

Other Resources

The Daily Examen
From IgnatianSpirituality.com, where you will find a wealth of resources about the examen.

Praying the Examen with Children
Becky Eldredge talks about her own experience using a super-simple Highs and Lows examen, with a twist: each child offers their highs and lows from the day, and each child prays for

another child’s highs and lows.

[Reflecting with Children: St. Ignatius’ Examen for Families with Children]
An article about the fruits of praying the Examen with children, and a step-by-step guide.

[Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life\]
Fr. Matthew Linn, SJ, Dennis Linn, and Sheila Fabricant Linn, well-known writers and retreat leaders, offer a family-friendly introduction to the practice of the examen. *80 pages*

[The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today]
The examen prayer is a transforming and ever-growing practice in Christian spirituality. In *The Examen Prayer*, Fr. Timothy Gallagher draws from real-life stories and his experience as a spiritual director to explain the core principles of the examen prayer: What is the examen and how can we begin to pray it? How can we adapt it to our individual lives? What are its fruits?