

## THE EXAMEN PRAYER

Many of the spiritual masters have indicated over the centuries that self-knowledge and self-awareness are essential in deepening our relationship with God. Maureen Conroy, R.S.M., author of *The Discerning Heart: Discovering a Personal God* phrases it this way, "Growth in relationship with God occurs through mutual self-revelation."<sup>1</sup> This is a powerful sentence but one that is all about relationship. This self-revelation must be mutual if our relationship with God is going to grow.

So how does God reveal Himself? We know that His self-revelation is found in the pages of Scripture, in the Church, in the world around us, through the people and events in our life, and in the "small, still voice" (1 Kings 19:12) that speaks in the depth of our hearts. In the Rule of the Secular Franciscan Order, we are called to "seek to encounter the living and active person of Christ", so that like St. Francis, we too can "see nothing bodily of the Most High Son of God in this world except his most holy body and blood." (Art. 5)

No one doubts that God reveals Himself, but how attentive are we to His divine self-revelation? He is revealing Himself constantly. Do we remain unaware or even worse, close our ears to that self-revelation? And then again, how much of ourselves are we revealing to God? How willing are we to reveal ourselves openly and fully to our merciful and loving God? We can ask ourselves if there are any resistances to opening ourselves fully, but how do we even know if there are resistances? How can we find it easier to respond and what might hinder that response?

This is what the Examen Prayer is all about. It is a way of "praying that opens our eyes to God's daily self-revelation and increasingly clarifies for us our own response to it."<sup>2</sup> As our clarity deepens we attain a greater freedom to respond and so to progress in our relationship with the One who loves us most. We ultimately discover what our hearts desire most of all: a growing relationship in love with God and by extension with our neighbor.

While we will be using the formula associated with St. Ignatius of Loyola, this prayer did not originate with him, nor was it unique to him. In our Franciscan tradition, how often do we read of our Holy Father Francis responding to the self-revelation of the Most High and desiring to know himself better? Months ago, during ongoing formation, we heard the story of Brother Leo observing St. Francis speaking to the flame of God in the forest and afterwards revealing that he had asked God, "Who are you, Lord, my God, and who am I?" In the Examen Prayer, like our holy Father Francis, we ask ourselves the same question and then listen.

### **Steps of the Examen Prayer-Pray daily for 15-20 minutes**

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<sup>1</sup> Maureen Conroy, R.S.M., *The Discerning Heart: Discovering a Personal God* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1993), 62

<sup>2</sup> Timothy Gallagher, O.M.V., *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2006), 21

- 1. Preparation:** Place yourself in the presence of God and become aware of His love for you. Turn your attention to the Heavenly Father and ask Him what He wants to show you today. Keep in mind that this is something God does. Our human efforts in the Examen Prayer are important but it is God's grace that leads us.
- 2. Gratitude:** Take note and thank God for the gifts He has given in the last 24 hours. Practically speaking, the gifts can be reviewed in chronological order or with the emphasis on a specific gift received during this period. Do not hurry or rush past this important step. In recognizing His gifts, this step focuses on what is essential in our relationship with God.
- 3. Review:** Now with God, review the past 24 hours. As you review the experiences of your life, know that God is at work in you. You may have experienced struggles and disappointments. How aware are you of their cause? As you go through your day, you will have experienced love, hope, anxiety, joys, fears, attractions, resistances, desires, etc. Where was God in these experiences? Toward what was God calling you in the day? How did you respond to this call? Were there inclinations and thoughts that were not "of God"? Were you able to discern them and resist them? Was the use of your freedom in accord with God's loving desire for you? The ability to become sensitive in identifying the spiritual experiences during the day ultimately results in an ability to identify clearly what is of God and what is not.<sup>3</sup>
- 4. Forgiveness:** Ask for healing from God to remove the burdens of your sins. God's loving forgiveness respects human dignity and heals human hurt. We ask for forgiveness and this opens our heart to embrace a deeper level of conversion and an outpouring of new life.
- 5. Resolution:** Now look at the day ahead. With God, plan on a concrete way to live better in accord with His will. Since you have reviewed with God the previous day and became aware of how He revealed Himself, you can prepare for what is coming and focus on how to better respond to God's call for growth. In this way, you are learning from your experiences and this becomes a resource for continual spiritual growth. The past illuminates the future and you can discover where God is leading as your relationship with Him develops and changes in life.
- 6. Transition:** Aware of God's presence, prayerfully conclude the Examen.

The Examen prayer is the specific daily exercise that will help you to discover where God's love is active and leading, to discern what within you is resisting His leading, and to discover the growth God is calling you to in order that the desire to follow Him continues to increase.

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<sup>3</sup> Timothy Gallagher, O.M.V., *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today* (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Co., 2006)