

REFLECTING WITH CHILDREN: THE EXAMEN FOR FAMILIES

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Preparing to Practice the Examen

The Ignatian Examen provides a tool and encouragement for us to review our actions, inactions (ways we showed love and ways we withheld showing compassion for a person or group) and the events of our day. Practicing the examen in community (i.e. a family gathered around the dining table or preparing for bed time) allows people to live an examined life, get to know one another more deeply, support one another, feel supported, and come to know ourselves and our Creator more intimately.

Practicing the examen with children will require patience on your part. Of course, remember that practicing the examen with parents may require patience on the part of your children, especially older ones. As you begin young children might express gratitude for a new toy. Remember they think and believe in concrete terms.

*This time of sharing will give you many opportunities to learn from your children, no matter their ages, for they are spiritual beings with great wisdom to share. The purpose of the examen is **not** to critique or instruct children on their behavior. The purpose is for **each** person to look carefully at their day, name that for which they are most grateful and least grateful, one way they showed love and one way they did not show love or withheld showing love.*

Practicing the examen must be a safe place for each person: no criticizing, no raising voices, no judgement. It is a spiritual discipline to view and name the ways each person saw God present in their day or made God manifest through their actions. It is also a time to receive God's mercy and love for times when they may have missed the mark by not loving, being kind, compassionate, or sharing with others.

It is important to be consistent with this practice. You may want to practice the examen each evening as you gather around the dining table for meals. I know dining together at a table is largely a lost occurrence, but know it can be a bonding time for families that is well worth the effort. You may also find it helpful to practice the examen as part of the bedtime routine with your children.

Of course, the younger children are when you begin this practice, the easier it is and the more they will help in remembering and guiding the process.

The Examen:

1. As you gather for this practice light a candle (or night light if this is part of your bedtime routine) and say something like, “We light this candle (or night light) to help us remember that the light of God’s love is in each of us and God asks us to share this light with everyone we meet.”
2. Slowly and spaciouly ask the following series of questions, beginning with “For what time or event today are you most grateful (thankful/happy)?“
 - (Initially, you may have to name a few things in a young child’s day to help them catch on to the practice for #1 and #2.)
3. For which moment are you least grateful?
4. How did you show love today?
 - (For very young children, you may ask additional questions as your family begins this spiritual practice. Ex.: Who did you share with today? Who did you help today? It won’t be long before they understand the question and can reflect and respond without your assistance.)
5. What was one time your actions or behavior were negative or you withheld showing love/kindness?
 - (Again, for young children you might ask: Was there a time you did not share today? Was there a time you said a hurtful word or did not help?)
6. Briefly give thanks for this time of reflection and sharing and for God teaching each of you to be more loving.
7. Consider ending your time by singing *Wherever Love Is*, by Bryan Sirchio, (<https://bryansirchio.bandcamp.com/track/wherever-love-is>) or another similar song.

Additional questions and encouragement for your family’s practice:

Following are additional examen questions that your family may choose to use for steps 1-4 above. These questions are from the wonderful resource about a family practice of the examen, *Sleeping with Bread*:

- For what moment and I most/least grateful today?
- When did I give and receive the most/least love today?
- When did I feel most alive today? When did I most feel life draining out of me?
- When today did I have the greatest/least sense of belonging?
- When was I happiest/saddest today?
- What was today’s high/low point?

If you are practicing the examen during mealtime, other topics may emerge that are semi-related or totally unrelated. Allow the person to finish sharing or asking a question. When they are finished, redirect the conversation back to the examen. There should be nothing heavy-handed about the examen.

Your family will find your own rhythm. You may rephrase the questions. You may choose to use only questions 1 and 2 or 3 and 4. Remember this is a time of reflection – allowing sacred light to shine on our day – and a time of sharing in a circle of love. Grace and peace as you embark on this journey with your loved ones.