

“Where is God in all this . . . ?”

There IS a way of praying which will help you answer this question!

This is the first in a series of articles on “ways of praying” which will be appearing in coming months. The emphasis in each is on the “how to” pray in a particular way.

In this first one, I am going to outline a way of praying, the Examen, originated by St Ignatius of Loyola (1491-1556) which will help you consider this very question – “where is God in all this?”.

There will be a number of steps to follow and also some important notions to help you ponder. First of all the steps:

1. Prepare! You need to allow yourself at least 20 minutes for this prayer. Before you start, you need to do what you can to eliminate external “noise”. Turn off your mobile; put away your lap top; put your landline on answerphone; turn off the washing machine; put your “to do” lists on one side. Try to have some kind of “inner room”, literal or metaphorical, to which you go. And you need some kind of gentle sound – pinger, mobile alarm, or whatever – to tell you when time is up. And also do what you can to create some “inner silence” – light a candle; breathe deeply; listen to some music; whatever “works” for you as you approach a time of prayer. You are about to encounter the living God – kerpow!
2. The first step of the prayer “proper”, as it were, is to look back over the last 24 hours, and let one good thing, happening, experience, encounter, for which you are thankful emerge into consciousness. As and when it does, simply enjoy it, bask in it, let feelings of gratitude and joy and thanksgiving for it well up within you. Milk it, appreciate it. Do this in silence but let your inner feelings rip! For this is one place God is or has been during your day!
3. The second step is a relatively short one – perhaps just a couple of minutes. It is a time of quiet preparation to listen to God. You may want to articulate a prayer of petition that you may not be deaf to God – but again you pray in silence, even if you are articulating your prayer in words. Equally you can just “dispose” yourself in silence to listen, however you best do that.
4. The third step the most important one – at least 10 minutes should be spent on this, and *it must not be hurried!* You look back over the last 24 hours again, this time looking for your experience of where God has been present to you, and equally where you may not have felt presence. You chew over not just external events but your own inner experience also. The important notions to use here are those of

“movements of the spirits” and “spiritual consolations and desolations” which I will explain below.

5. The fourth step is again a short one. You may as a result become aware of things you feel bad about in some way. Simply own or confess them before God – but do NOT indulge in any undue guilt or beating yourself up about them. *Claim for yourself absolution or forgiveness* – perhaps from scripture or one of the formats in our liturgy book. You do not need any priest for this!
6. The final one is brief but full of potential for your growth. A friend of mine said “we do not have failure – we have success and we have learning experience”. This is where you log your learning experience as a result of this prayer. Afterwards you can put the notes in any journal you keep.

When you first begin this practice, you may need your “pinger” for each of the steps – 5 minutes for the first; 2 for the second; 12 for the third; and so on. But you will find your own rhythm. Typically the prayer is done at the end of the day, but choose a time to suit you.

There are some important notions to use to help you do the pondering:

1. Movements of the spirits (plural). Signs of the good spirit (singular) are whatever gives the fruits of the spirit. Where there is energy, enthusiasm, life – these are signs of the good spirit. Harassment, anxiety, a “hardening of the oughteries” - are signs of bad spirits at work. The feeling of flogging a dead horse is a real give away – is God really at work in whatever it is, however apparently virtuous? A sense of absence can also be a sign that we are resisting God in some way – not going in the direction we are intended to take. This takes some honesty to admit! This language of “bad spirits” reflects the time and world view in which it was written; it may need some translation for today but the spiritual experience is real enough.
2. Spiritual consolations and desolations. These are not necessarily the same as your emotions and feelings. Disentangling the two is what you ponder. You can have spiritual consolation in the midst of depression, difficulty and frustration. And you can be moving away from God even if you maybe feeling on a high, good about something, revelling in apparent success. This is the tricky bit! And we don’t always get it right first time. The practice of this prayer, and keeping notes of the learning points, are of the essence here for our continued growth and development.

This kind of personal private silent prayer does not replace intercessory prayer. And it is in addition to our participation in group or corporate prayer or worship. But it can be a powerful tool to get some kind of perspective on our life and help discover what God is actually trying to do with and in us!

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