

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP

# Giving ourselves to God more and more

Every now and then, when I spend the night in a hotel or at a friend's house, I awake in the morning and for a brief moment don't know where I am. I'm confused and frustrated until I get my bearings, then I smile at my absentmindedness.

As creatures of habit, we take our bearings in a variety of ways, usually without awareness of how we are doing so. The location of the windows and the door; the sounds of the heating system and the neighbors' dogs; the feel of the carpet or the cold tile on our feet.

These sense perceptions become so much a part of our personal landscape that we identify with them in an automatic, spontaneous way. They tell us whether we are at home or lost, safe or in danger, alone or with family and friends.

From a spiritual perspective, intentionally getting our bearings is a good, even necessary, thing to do. We call such an exercise "examen" or "examination of conscience," and we use it as a means of probing and assessing our relationship with God and others. Although we most often associate an examination of conscience with the sacrament of penance, there is a long tradition in the church of making it a nightly practice.

We instinctively know that faith is taking us somewhere — that God is taking us somewhere — but perhaps we do not ask often enough whether we are doing all we can to stay on that path, whether we are cooperating with

or resisting God's loving tug, whether we have left our friends and families behind in our dusty tracks (because of our insensitivity) or lagged far behind them (because of our laziness).



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## Start with humility

Examen helps us get our bearings, ensures we are on the path of God, and encourages loving awareness of the people around us. It reminds us that a vibrant relationship with God awakens the deepest resources of our souls and helps us flourish where we are. Examen is about growth — increase in faith and deepening our relationship with God; it is about contrition — sorrow for sin and the experience of God's mercy; it is about love — recognizing the faces and needs of those we already love and opening our hearts to those we have locked out.

An examination of conscience can take a variety of forms. Usually it includes some kind of standard or compass (the Ten Commandments, the beatitudes, or a specific set of spiritual and moral questions). It ends with the formation of simple resolutions to work on one area or another with the goal of learning how to give God's commands primacy in our lives.

The format could be something like this:

First, humble ourselves in the presence of God. A favorite Scripture passage can help us attain the proper frame of mind. "Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner." "Lord, if you will, you

can make me clean."

## The focus we need

Next, ask for God's light to see ourselves and others as he sees us, light to recognize and acknowledge our weaknesses, the temptations that surround us, and our sins. Ask for a truly penitent heart, a genuine desire to grow, and the courage to follow through on our resolutions.

Next, use a particular standard to examine ourselves. We could use either those mentioned above or a simple, personal one, along these lines: Whom have I offended today — God, my family or neighbor, myself? What have I done right, and how can I deepen my desire to do always what is right? What could I have done better? Have I tried to be "successful" on my own, or have I acknowledged to God that I can do nothing without his grace? Do I allow myself to be easily distracted from his ways? Do I thank God and others for the good they have done for me?

Next, express our sorrow and ask God's pardon. We could make an act of contrition or reflect on another Scripture passage. "A humble and contrite heart, O God, you will not spurn." "Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you."

Finally, consider ways to grow and improve in the sight of God, then make a resolution to give attention to certain areas for improvement. Do I need to

stay away from specific temptations? Work on a particular virtue — truth, charity, patience, joy? Do I need to give more time to prayer? Notice those around me instead of thinking of myself? Any of these simple questions gives us ample material for tomorrow's discipleship.

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When blessed ashes were smudged on our foreheads several weeks ago,

we were marked for the journey of repentance, through Christ, to our heavenly Father. Developing a nightly practice of examen might give the focus we need for a fruitful Lent by preparing us for our Lenten confession (especially if it has been a long time since our last confession) and refining our docility to God's commands.

We have our bearings and know precisely where we stand when we are mindful of our relationship with God. Awareness of our sinfulness and need for God's help are a great blessing, because they open us to his boundless mercy. The goal of Lent, after all, is not to be successful at fasting and penance — it is to give ourselves to God more and more, to express sorrow for our sins, and to be at peace knowing that every morning, no matter where we are, we awake in his loving hands.