

Reflecting on the Year with the Prayer of Examen

I like to view New Year's as a time of transition that prepares me for a new beginning. This year, I am concluding 2023 with all of its events, experiences, joys and achievements, as well as all of its disappointments and grief. And I am given the chance to pause and reflect, to set my intention as I enter into the unknown year unfolding before me.

I often do some form of the Prayer of Examen around New Year's, which is a spiritual practice created by the 15th century Saint Ignatius. In it you choose a period of time to review following five steps. So, I invite us to walk through these steps together to reflect on 2023 and face into 2024 with hope and resilience.

The first step is to ask God for light to illuminate the ways God has been present in the past year and you may not have noticed. This comes from the assumption that God is always present and in becoming more aware of this, we can enjoy greater freedom in our lives.

Our Gospel reading today says: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." In the Greek "flesh" can also be translated as *matter*, as in everything we can see and touch, all of the tiny particles of atoms and molecules. So one way to understand these enigmatic verses in John is that the Word became *matter*, and lived among us. God—the infinite and Divine Creator—has entered into our reality, not just in the perfect form of Jesus, but in intermingling in creation's very matter.

As our matter, Franciscan sister and theologian Ilia Delio says that the Word is the root reality of all existence, expressed in every created form, every star, leaf, bird, fish, tree, rabbit, and human person. Everything is christified because everything expresses divine love incarnate. God is always present to us because God is *in* us and *in* all of creation, and this is the good news of the incarnation!

Which brings us to the second step of the Prayer of Examen, which is to give thanks for this last year. Our reading in Isaiah gives us a helpful metaphor when it says: "For as the earth brings forth its shoots and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all nations". In other words, God is the garden in which we grow, and the soil that the seeds of our lives are planted within. Our lives sprout up and flourish, not through our own ability or doing, but through God's many provisions of divine love that have been made manifest in our *matter*, provisions like soil and sun and rain and oxygen, the whole ecosystem we are a part of, and all that keeps us rooted in God and supported in love.

As the Gospel of John said: "Everything comes into being first through God." So, we give thanks for all of the gifts we have received during the entirety of 2023.

The third step of the Examen is to review the previous year. What happened in 2023? What events took place and what did you experience? I always appreciate that St Ignatius values the role of emotions in this step. He said to notice what brought feelings like joy, hope, thanksgiving, or courage, signifying a closer awareness of God's presence. And notice what brought feelings like despair, anger, confusion, or sadness, signifying that you were not experiencing God's presence. What might these feelings be telling you, and what does God want to teach or reveal to you through them? Perhaps God wants to comfort you as you remember a time of grief, or maybe in remembering an activity that made you feel fully alive and invigorated, you start discerning a new vocation or line of work or hobby. In looking back over the year, what are the highs and lows and mundane moments? What are the things you are proud of, and the things that evoke guilt or shame and regret?

Which brings me to the fourth step, which is to face your shortcomings. We all have them, and we all need ways to acknowledge them, make amends

with God, ourselves, and others, and move forward, unburdened by the weight we are carrying. Our prayer of confession in the BCP gives us a way to do this. In it, we confess the things we have done, and the things we have left undone. We acknowledge the ways we have not loved God with our whole heart, and have not loved our neighbors as ourselves, and we humbly repent. But repenting isn't just saying you are sorry. To repent means to turn away from sin and dedicate oneself to the amendment of one's life.

So, what do you want to turn away from and leave behind during this transition of ending one year and beginning another? Now is a great time to boldly set that intention!

Which leads me to the final and fifth step: to look toward the year ahead, not as something far off in the future, but as something that is quickly becoming today, and to look ahead with hope. You are not defined by what happened last year, or any year for that matter. Every moment is a new beginning and with it comes an opportunity for a different choice that will align you more to Christ and lead you into more authentic freedom.

Our reading in Isaiah says: "You shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give you." In other words, your true identity is in God, and God will continue to bring your true identity into fullness. God will liberate you from what has wrongfully marked you as anything other than God's Beloved. God will remove your guilt and shame, and robe you in righteousness. God will call you chosen and not forsaken; the one in whom God delights.

So, what do you want to introduce into your life that will improve the condition you are currently in? What will help you be more fully aligned to Christ tomorrow, and the next day, and the next?

Maybe you will want to do a daily Prayer of Examen for yourself? Or adopt another spiritual practice that helps you stay oriented towards God in the high, low, and mundane moments of your

year, while knowing that whatever intention you set won't be carried out through your own willpower and ability, but through resting into God who is at work in you.

So, as we enter into this New Year together may the Prayer of Examen be a blessing to take with you:

May you know that God is with you intermingling in the very substance and minute details of your life.

May you be grounded in gratitude, securely rooted in the garden of God's love, recognizing everything in your life as a gift.

May you reflect back and notice all the ways you are being divinely guided, so you can respond accordingly in the present, and *enjoy* all of the gifts you have been given.

May you have the courage to face your shortcomings, so you can turn away from what doesn't serve you or others, and dedicate yourself to the amendment of your life, making you unburdened and free.

And may you look ahead into this New Year with hope, confident in your true identity as God's beloved, and expectant for how your belovedness will continue to take shape in the world this year and in every moment that brings with it a new beginning.

Amen.