

The Ignatian Examen: A Tool for Discerning Calling

Curriculum for Faith Formation Leaders A Project for Vibrant Faith, C3 Initiative

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LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- To give participants a basic understanding of the Ignatian Examen as a spiritual discipline.
- To show participants how the Ignatian Examen is connected to the Christian concept of calling from a theological vantage point.
- To teach participants how to use the Ignatian Examen as tool to hear God's voice in their own discernment of calling.

WORKSHOP CONTENT:

This workshop introduces participants to the Ignatian Examen through the following four components:

- Teaching Segment
- Ignatian Examen Practice
- Small Group Reflection
- Large Group Reflection

WORKSHOP MATERIALS:

The following materials should be provided by the host church or faith formation leaders:

- Writing utensils pencils, pens, etc.
- Loose leaf paper both lined and unlined is preferable to give participants options.
- Printed out handouts for all participants, including a few extras for last minute attendees.
- Option for snacks or full meal, drinks, plastic plates, utensils, cups, and napkins.

FAITH FORMATION LEADERS SHOULD ADVISE PARTICIPANTS TO BRING THE FOLLOWING IF DESIRED:

- A journal or other preferred paper
- Preferred writing utensil
- Bible

**Please note that while writing is optional for this workshop, it is highly recommended. Also note that the host church or faith formation leaders should tell participants that they will be providing writing materials ahead of time while also having the option for participants to bring their own. People often forget or neglect to bring writing materials, which is why having them available at the workshop is important. Writing materials should be placed on tables where participants will be sitting to easily access them.



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RECOMMENDED READINGS:

Faith formation leaders may find these readings helpful in conceptualizing the teaching portion of the workshop, as well as in expanding their understanding of the Examen and Ignatian spirituality in general.

- The Examen Prayer: Ignatian wisdom for our lives today, by Timothy M. Gallagher
- Sleeping with Bread: Holding what gives you life, by Dannis Linn & Sheila Fabricant Linn
- Reimagining the Ignatian Examen: Fresh ways to pray from your day, by Mark Thibodeaux
- A Simple, Life-changing Prayer: Discovering the power of St. Ignatius Loyola's Examen, by Jim Manney
- Inner Compass: An invitation to Ignatian Spirituality, by Margaret Silf

TEACHING SEGMENT

The teaching segment of the workshop will be focused largely on giving participants a basic understanding of the Examen and what specifically makes the Examen a spiritual discipline. It is understood that most participants will already have a working definition and conceptualization of calling due to the efforts of the C3 Initiative. Thus, faith formation leaders will focus their teaching primarily on how the concept of calling is both informed and expanded by the Examen.

The following page includes an outline intended to assist faith formation leaders in structuring their teaching segment. Faith formation leaders can treat this as a script that they can say verbatim, which will be in this regular font.

Words in *italics* indicate instructions that will not be said aloud.

Words in **bold** indicate headings that help to structure the teaching and that will not be said aloud.

Faith formation leaders can choose to fill in illustrative examples from their personal lives as they desire and see fit. This is not required; however personal examples can be helpful both in elucidating concepts and establishing a deeper and more personal connection with participants.





TEACHING SEGMENT SCRIPT:

I. Opening Prayer

II. Opening Exercise

- A. How many of you take time to reflect, either at the beginning or the end of your day? (Allow participants to raise hands). Take a moment now and reflect on your day yesterday. Take a few minutes to write down something for which you are grateful, and something for which you are not grateful.
- B. Give participants a few minutes to write down a response to this prompt.
- C. Think of this as a "warm up" for our workshop. Today, we are going to explore how reflections such as this one can help us discern God's calling on our lives.

III. Overview of Calling

- A. What comes to mind when you think about the idea of calling? (Ask audience).
- B. Recap what your church has learned so far from C3 Initiative in a few sentences.

IV. Introduction to the Ignatian Examen

- A. Today we will be exploring a spiritual discipline called the Ignatian Examen
- B. The Ignatian Examen is a tool for helping us find direction for our lives both on the micro level of everyday situations, as well as on the macro level of our ultimate calling and vocation.
- C. The Examen is also called the "examination of consciousness."
- D. In the sixteenth century, St. Ignatius of Loyola founded what are known as the "Spiritual Exercises" a set of meditations, prayers, and other exercises designed to help with spiritual discernment. This Examen is part of this.
- E. Ignatius wanted people around him to be able to detect the movement of God in their lives. He believed that God moves uniquely in each soul, and our ability to discern God's direction for our lives comes from our awareness of this movement.
- F. The tricky thing is that this movement can be subtle it is the "still, small voice" that we can easily to miss if we aren't trying to be intentionally conscious of it.
- G. On a basic level, the Examen is a way for us to slow down from our duties and busyness so that we can notice where God actually shows up in our day. This means noticing how God's internal movement is present in all of the external comings and goings of our days.
- H. The Examen helps us to listen more deeply to what our lives are already telling us. It helps us recognize what brings us new life, and what leads to death. Once we have this information, we can use it as we interact with God in prayer. So, the Examen can become a crucial tool for discernment in our relationships, our professions, and other areas of our lives.





V. Overview: Relationship of Examen to Discernment of Calling

- A. The Examen helps us to be more aware of moments that we at first might dismiss as insignificant. Yet if we identify and reflect on them, they can actually give us clues to our calling, and ultimately direction for our lives.
- B. The Examen questions help you identify where and when you feel most alive, most refreshed, most grateful, and most aware of and present to the Spirit's movement. These are all clues to your calling in the world.
- C. As you do this, the question becomes: how can I move towards those places that are most life-giving for me, and move away from those that are life-thwarting?
- D. (There are some exceptions sometimes our desolations can point us to difficult emotions that we may be avoiding. In this case, it is up to us to learn how to discern that, with the help of the Spirit.)
- E. Both the high and the low points we identify are an invitation to prayer and self-awareness. They give us perspective and direction for the future. This happens through listening to where and how God shows up our day, and then interacting with God through prayer
- F. When you are more in touch with the Spirit's movement in your life through the Examen, you are then more in touch with the person God made you to be.
- G. As you begin to recognize the person God made you to be, you have the raw material for discerning God's unique call and design for your life.
- H. Over time, you will be able to recognize patterns. You will notice that certain situations, tasks, or interactions tend to fill you with gratitude, life, love and connection, and others have the opposite effect. These patterns are blueprints for how God made you.
- I. Once you can better understand how God made you the things that draw you and the things that drain you you will have more insight into where God is calling you.
- J. While all of us have "bad" days where life and work feel hard, if we are doing the work we are called to do than our overarching sentiment will be one of consolation and deep satisfaction. A sense of gratitude, life, love, and connection will ultimately outweigh any bumps in the road we may experience along the way.

VI. Basic Structure

- A. When you are doing the Ignatian Examen, you can choose from the following six sets of questions:
 - 1. For what moment today am I most grateful? For what moment today am I least grateful?
 - 2. When did I give and receive the most love today? When did I give and receive the least love today?
 - 3. What was the most life-giving part of my day? What was the most life-thwarting part of my day?
 - 4. When did I have the deepest sense of connection with God, others, and myself? When did I have the least sense of connection?
 - 5. Where was I aware of living out the fruit of the Spirit? Where was there an absence of the fruit of the Spirit?
 - 6. Where did I experience "desolation"? Where did I find "consolation"?
- B. You will find these questions on your handout. Today, we are going to explore each set of questions and how they are related to the discernment of calling.





VII. Examen Questions Unpacked

- A. Question 1: For what moment today am I most grateful? For what moment today am I least grateful?
 - Gratitude and calling can be inextricably connected.
 - Your place of calling is often a place where you experience deep gratitude to God. So often, the places we are called are places where we have received from God in some way in our own lives. Then, God calls us to serve Him and others from that same place.
 - Frederick Buechner writes: "The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet."
 - In a similar way, your calling may also be a place where you have been wounded in some way, and where you have seen God bring redemption through your story.
 - In that case, the gratitude you experience derives from having known pain and having then received healing. As we behold God's transformation in our own lives, we find in ourselves a longing to be a part of the larger work of restoration that God is doing in the world in that particular area.
 - The places where we feel gratitude in our daily lives give us hints at what kinds of work, interactions, and spaces we are drawn to.
 - As human beings, we are forgetful creatures, and in our brokenness, we are unable to sustain a posture of gratitude throughout the day.
 - We are more prone to be consumed with anxiety, by what we have not done yet or do not yet have.
 - However, there are moments where we remember, so to speak moments when we tap into the objective reality that in Christ, we already are beloved and we already have everything we need. We experience a sense of fullness, a sense that who we are and what we have are enough.
 - These are moments when gratitude breaks through we are able to be present to what is rather than what is not, to see abundance rather than lack. These moments are times in our day when it is easiest for us to live in the way we were intended to live in overflowing gratitude to God for who He is and all that He has done for us.
 - The Examen helps us to pay attention to these moments to put them under a magnifying glass and see what exactly they are comprised of. This is one of the reasons we focus on the "what" of those moments, rather than the "why".
 - The "what" draws us away from the constant tendency to analyze and instead reveals the actual, material contents of our gratitude.
 - Our calling will never be something abstract. Just as Jesus' life was full of
 particularities, our everyday lives are rife with concrete, embodied, and sensory stuff
 that will lead us more and more towards the substance of our calling if only we pay
 attention to them.





- B. Question 2: When did I give and receive the most love today? When did I give and receive the least love today?
 - The Examen reveals clues to our calling by helping us identify exchanges of God's love that occur throughout our day.
 - We often hear the phrase "Love what you do!" or "Do what you love!" We are told this is what we should aspire with regard to our vocation.
 - At the same time, we don't often define exactly what we mean by the word "love" in this context, so people may have different assumptions about what it means. Often, we mean it in a more superficial sense; "loving what we do" indicates that we enjoy our work at least to a degree (which is not the norm in our culture), and that we get some degree of satisfaction from it.
 - However, the Examen hints at something deeper as it relates to calling. The Examen asks us to consider not only moments of "love" where we feel enjoyment or satisfaction, but more specifically times when we give and receive love. So, the place of our calling is the place where we can most readily participate in an exchange of love and not just any sort of "love," but God's own love.
 - Here, "love" refers to the experience of communion with God through the presence of Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. Our calling is the place where all of these aspects of the Trinity meet and make their home in us.
 - In the same way, our calling is a place where we are able to become most like God it is a place of our sanctification.
 - Throughout the process of sanctification, God removes blockages in our souls that have prevented us from becoming like God and receiving his love fully. This enables us to receive more of his love and, in doing so, to manifest that love in the world around us.
 - The essence of our calling is that sweet spot where we are most able to both receive God's love and manifest it to others.
 - So, what the Examen is really asking here is where have I been able to most fully incarnate Jesus in the world around me today? Where have I experienced my own belovedness? Where have I experienced myself as a new creation? Where have I felt the least barriers with others and felt most free to manifest the love that I am in Christ?
 - So, the phrase "do what you love!" in the language of calling really means "do what makes you most in touch with your belovedness!" The Examen is a means to get you there.
 - The Examen draws our attention to the fact that calling will involve receiving love just as much as giving love.
 - This may seem counterintuitive, as usually we think of calling as primarily about giving love to others or to the world. We see it as a way to "give back" to others by using our gifts.
 - Certainly, there is a component of giving and of "being used by God", as we Christians so often like to say. However, to see calling as only about our giving or being useful to God misses the incredible truth that, in doing the things we are called to do, we receive God's love in a unique way that is specially crafted to how God made us. We are not valuable to God because of our utility to him; we are valuable simply because he loves us.





Question 2 continued...

- This is the heart of the gospel we first receive God's love for us in Christ, our infinite value to him, and we serve others out of what we have received. This Divine love that is ours regardless of anything we do or don't do. We simply get to participate in what God is already doing in the world through collaboration with him.
- [Option to use relevant personal example: Being a counselor is part of my calling. It is a way that I, Katie, am uniquely suited to give God's love as I am present with others in pain. However, I cannot give what I have not yet received myself; so, me giving out love in my work necessarily implies that I have already opened myself to allow God to love me first. An empty well cannot give others water. Not only that, but I more often than not find that I receive God's love for me in fresh ways through the experience of counseling others. The Examen can help me to continually identify moments where this exchange takes place so that I can continue to respond to God's calling in my life. "Those who refresh others will themselves be refreshed" Proverbs 11:25.]
- Identifying moments where we give and receive love using the Examen can lead us toward our calling by clarifying our motivations.
 - So often we pursue what we think to be our calling because of faulty motivations because of pressure we feel from ourselves or others, because of societal or cultural expectations, or other forces outside of ourselves.
 - We may subconsciously pursue a certain path out of fear, insecurity, or scarcity rather than out of abundance, true confidence, and love.
 - However, God will always use his love to draw us to our true callings; so as we learn
 to recognize the concrete circumstances in which our love exchanges take place using
 the Examen, we can allow these to shape our motivations and point us in the
 direction where God is leading.
- Identifying moments where we are most able to participate in the exchange of love using the Examen is an invitation to pray into our calling.
 - When we engage in the Examen, it is always an invitation to prayer. We can pray for God to continue to remove blockages in our souls so that we can receive his love more fully.
 - As such, we can pray for more transformation so that we can move into the place of our calling with increasing freedom.
 - We can pray for the healing of an unhealthy pride that says that we are the primary givers. It requires a certain humility to acknowledge that we must receive before we have the wherewithal to truly give.
- Over time, God can use the Examen to help change our relationship with our calling.
 - When we learn to view our calling as a way we receive love from God, we will in time be able to give it more freely and with less compulsion.
 - We will be more in touch with the reality that God does the work of our calling through us as a way to draw us continually closer into a love relationship with God's self.
 - So, we will see ourselves as benefitting just as much as those we serve in the world.





- C. Question 3: What is the most life-giving part of my day?

 What is the most life-thwarting part of my day?
 - The place of your calling will be a life-giving place.
 - This means it will be a place where you feel refreshed and alive, where you feel most free to be your authentic self, no more and no less.
 - This doesn't mean you won't have some hard or draining days; it just means that there will be an overarching feeling of enthusiasm for your work that outweighs any difficulty.
 - There will be a general sense of ease, even on days that feel more stressful.
 - Challenges will seem more like opportunities to grow than obstacles that could impede you.
 - Identifying life-giving moments begins with noticing where you feel most energized during your day.
 - As we go throughout our days, we experience many small exchanges of energy. Even something as seemingly minor as checking your work email in the evening can affect you because of the effort it takes to mentally and emotionally shift states.
 - At the same time, having an encouraging conversation can fill your body, mind, and spirit with new openness and possibility.
 - The Examen helps us notice where these shifts occur and identify where they feel most palpable as we go about our days.
 - What are moments when something piqued your interest, when you wanted to keep talking, when you got so lost in something that you forgot what time it was? Maybe you were so engrossed in your task or conversation that you even forgot to eat!
 - These are important moments that reveal our selves to us, and reveal life as it was meant to be. They reveal "the glory of God (as) man fully alive," as St. Irenaeus famously wrote.
 - They are moments when it feels easier to be present to whatever is happening and where, in being truly present, we receive a taste of God's kingdom. Our calling will be the place where our truest self is energized and nourished, and where our natural enthusiasm intersects with eternity.
 - Identifying life-thwarting moments can give you clues about what you do not enjoy, where you are not gifted, and your general limitations.
 - Being in touch with your weaker areas is a crucial part of discerning your calling. At the same time, part of growing as a person of faith is having the humility to both recognize where you are less gifted and inclined, and also accept this as important information rather than a negative judgment about your value or who you are.
 - The more you can identify and be in the reality of how God made you, and did not make you, the clearer your calling will become.
 - Sometimes being acquainted with this "negative" information can lead to even more insights than the "positive" information!





- D. Question 4: When today did I have the deepest sense of connection with God, others, and myself? When today did I have the least sense of connection?
 - Your calling will be a place where you feel connected to yourself, to others and to God.
 - Your calling is the place where you feel most deeply in sync with the work God is doing in the world, where you can see a vision for your small yet irreplaceable part in the Story God has been writing since the beginning of time.
 - More specifically, the Examen can aid your discernment by helping you pinpoint moments during your day when you feel connection on three distinct levels: self, others, and God.

1. Connection with self:

- Being connected with yourself means that you feel you truly belong to yourself. You can sense when you are acting like your truest self, and when you are not.
- Your inner life and your outer life are for the most part congruent. You are being basically the same person with other people that you experience on the inside. You are not putting up walls. You are not hiding parts of yourself to appease others or because you feel shame.
- You are not allowing anxieties or fears within yourself to dictate your actions.
- Where did you notice this congruence playing out? Where did you notice feeling least self-conscious or inhibited during your day?

2. Connection with others:

- Being connected with others means that you are open to the people in your life a real way.
- You are open to hearing people on their own terms rather than relying on your assumptions about them. You really listen. You engage in candid conversations, even if they are uncomfortable. You practice vulnerability by sharing appropriately and honestly about yourself with other people, and in doing so allow yourself to truly belong to them.
- Where did you notice this sense of openness with others in yourself today?
 When was it easiest to share honestly with someone?

3. Connection with God:

- Being connected with God means that you are moving in step with the Holy Spirit as He leads you throughout the day. You experience God speaking to you in a deeply personal and meaningful way. You feel in touch with His power. You sense where you are to be obedient. You feel peaceful, faithful, and content. You feel the person you are and your work in the world is pleasing to Him.
- Where did you sense God's voice today? Where were you aware of His leading?

God's work in the world is always work that facilitates connection.

- The God we serve is One who builds, grows, redeems, and restores. These are not abstractions, but rather are things that He wants us to actually experience on a felt, internal level.
- When there is disconnection, discord, or a sense of being cut off from yourself, others, or the world, that is not from God. As such, your calling will not be a place of isolation.
- When you feel disconnected, you are unable to see a vision for your life that makes sense or imagine your part in God's story. Much to the contrary, your calling will be a place where you are uniquely suited to promote God's work of reconciliation and growth in the world around you.





- E. Question 5: Where was I aware of living out the fruit of the Spirit? Where was there an absence of the fruit of the Spirit?
- "The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control..." Galatians 5:22-23
- When you are living close to God as you live out your calling, you cannot help but bear fruit.
- Your calling will be an area where God can work through you with a special ease. You are not only more open to receiving His work in you; you are also able to manifest the fruits of the Spirit in a way that feels natural rather than contrived.
- You are open to His further refinement of you, you are able to show others His character, and you desire these things.
- The Message translation also provides a more nuanced picture what true life in the Spirit can feel like inwardly and what fruit it can bear tangibly in the world.

But what happens when we live God's way? He brings gifts into our lives, much the same way that fruit appears in an orchard—things like affection for others, exuberance about life, serenity. We develop a willingness to stick with things, a sense of compassion in the heart, and a conviction that a basic holiness permeates things and people. We find ourselves involved in loyal commitments, not needing to force our way in life, able to marshal and direct our energies wisely. Galatians 5:22-23

- F. Question 6: Where did I experience "desolation"?

 Where did I find "consolation"?
- All the Examen questions can be summed up and articulated in this last question.
 - The former questions provide more nuance as you begin to notice, understand, and express your interior movements. The more you practice the Examen, the more you will be able to categorize your daily moments as those when you felt either desolation or consolation.

Desolation:

- In Ignatian spirituality, "desolation" refers to moments when we feel spiritual deadness we experience a sense of being drained, disconnected, heavy, or simply that something is not right. These are moments when we feel turned in on ourselves in an unhealthy way, when we feel discontent and unrest.
- When we experience desolation, we may not be able to recognize God's presence or involvement in our spiritual journey for a time; we may forget his character, we may actively resist Him, or we may feel overtaken by doubt, fear, insecurity, or some other uncomfortable emotion or spiritual attack.
- Then, we may be tempted to engage in false consolations that distract us from these experiences, such as drinking excessively, shopping, overeating, or other behaviors.
- These activities may feel good for a time; however, they do not lead to lasting peace, joy, or love. They lead us further away from the true consolation of God's presence.





• Consolation:

- In Ignatian spirituality, "consolation" refers to the moments in our day when we feel spiritually filled and contented. This is a sensation that goes beyond merely a feeling of peace or happiness and into a sense of deeper communion with God.
- For instance, Ignatian writer Vinita Hampton Wright notes that we may be following exactly where God is leading, and so feel consolation, yet at the same time experience negative pressure from others, or other kinds of external resistance. In instances like these, if we sense we truly are moving in the right direction, this spiritual reality brings consolation whether or not we experience hardship along the way.
- Consolation is the experience of feeling seen and known by God in such a way that we
 cannot help but feel rest and relief. We experience a sense of internal balance and, as
 a result, we can see the world around us with new clarity.
- We can more easily be in reality without fear or resistance. We can sense and name God's activity in our lives and find ourselves willing to do what it takes to stay in step with Him. We feel more able to embrace ourselves in a healthy way, and therefore more readily embrace and empathize with others.

VIII. Conclusion

- In conclusion, the Examen is a way for us to see more deeply into our daily lives.
- When we pay attention to moments in our day, we can encounter God in new and unexpected ways.
- When we take time to intentionally reflect in this way, we will be more in touch with our truest selves and will be able to grasp more fully our calling in the world around us.

Closing Prayer

Ignatian Examen Practice:

Directly following the Teaching Segment, participants will enter into a 30-minute time of practicing the Ignatian Examen and responding to the prompts in the handout. Faith formation leaders will distribute Examen handouts to guide participants both in listening for God's voice and beginning to write. These include the Examen questions and prompts, instructions, practical tips, relevant terms, relevant Scriptures, and a book list. Faith formation leaders can encourage participants to spread out in the building, go outside (weather dependent), or go wherever is most comfortable for them to write.

Large Group Reflection:

Faith formation leaders will gather participants back together for a period of large group reflection, asking the following questions:

- How many of you have done the Examen before? How many of you was this new for?
- Reflect on the experience of practicing the Examen and responding to the prompts. What was
 it like for you to notice significant moments in your day?
 What was it like to notice your inner experience and God's presence in your life?
- How did you sense God's voice?

Faith formation leaders should make every effort to ensure that every participant who chooses to share is fully heard and not interrupted. Faith formation leaders should re-direct any interruptions back to the prompts or the person sharing in a manner that is kind but firm.





Small Group Reflection:

Faith formation leaders have participants split up into small groups of around 4 or so people. Small groups will answer the following prompts together:

- Reflect on what it was like for you to do the Examen. What surprised you? What came up in you?
- How was it listening for the Holy Spirit's leading in your reflection time? What did you learn about yourself, about God?
- How do you sense that the moments you identified might be related to your calling, if at all?
- Where are you right now in your own discernment of your calling? Where do you sense God leading, if at all?
- Take turns sharing for each question. If you feel so led, you may also share some of your writing with the group!

**Please note that these prompts will be printed out on the handouts that participants will be receiving at the beginning of the workshop. Faith formation leaders should direct participants to the handouts before dividing into small groups. Suggested time for discussion is 30-45 minutes.

Large Group Reflection:

Faith formation leaders will gather participants back together again for a final large group reflection, asking the following questions:

- What came up in your small group reflection time?
- What was it like to share with your small group and to hear from your small group members?
- Anything else anyone would like to share about the workshop?
- Ouestions?

Faith formation leaders will leave the last few minutes of the workshop to answer any questions participants may have about the Examen, the workshop, calling, etc.

Closing Prayer



