



# Pay attention to your spiritual life by praying the examination of consciousness

HITS: 89

JOURNEY TOWARD HOLINESS



By Sister Mary Garascia

“Day by day, day by day, O, sweet Lord, three things I pray: to see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly, follow thee more nearly, day by day.” Steven Schwartz used this long-ago prayer of St. Richard of Chichester in the musical *Gospel*. Subsequently it became a classic hymn. I guess it’s a common faith experience to want to “see [God] more clearly” so that we can love and follow. Prayer is supposed to help with that. But I struggle with prayer, and in 27 years of parish ministry, I never heard any parishioner tell me prayer was easy!

Time, of course, is one problem. We live in a busy world, connected to family and friends and everything in the world. Our workday is often extended – by long commutes, by having to work more than 40 hours a week to make ends meet. Parents are on duty 24/7 for a couple decades. Even in retirement, we have so many other things to attend to. No wonder we can’t find time to be truly attentive to the happenings in us and around us, things God uses to communicate with us.

Besides the time problem, many of us were mainly taught to pray using formula prayers like the Our Father and Hail Mary, the Rosary, novenas, devotions. There is nothing wrong with these kinds of prayers, and we can fit them into bits of time, maybe while doing routine tasks. But they may not get us to “see [God] more clearly.” Other prayer methods like centering prayer, lectio, or meditation, do help us toward that goal, but they take sustained practice and often more time than “regular folks” have.

My personal favorite prayer for busy people is the simple five-step “consciousness examination,” which I’ve mentioned before in this column. It’s short, about the same 15 minutes as a Rosary. You can do it anytime of the day and anyone can do it. It doesn’t require being smart or highly educated, although it was adapted by the smart and highly educated St. Ignatius of Loyola. He wanted to help his Jesuits find God in everything. That sounds like a good plan, doesn’t it?

Like all prayer, we begin this consciousness examination by “placing ourselves in God’s presence.” That just means saying something like “Hi God, I’m here, checking in.” Use your own favorite way of addressing God. But be sure that the God you have in your mind is friendly! If we have a fearsome or judgmental image of God, we need to replace it with another in order to pray well. Picture instead the risen Jesus, inviting his disciples to breakfast on the beach (John 21:9-12), and just accept his smiling invitation.

The first step of the consciousness examination is gratitude. Take a quick look back over the last 24 hours to find what you are grateful for. It can be little things, big things, a word heard, something funny or beautiful or loving, a task completed, anything. Take a couple minutes to enjoy the memory of these good things and say thanks for them.

The second step is to run through that same 24 hours again, remembering your actions, thoughts, and words. You already noticed

things you were grateful for, but what other feelings did I have during these 24 hours? Were you anxious? Hurt? Angry? What stands out as “consequential” – something you were fussing about, trying to figure out or avoid dealing with, something that upset you.

This second step leads right into the third: considering our “sins.” That word is in quotes because we don’t mean murder! The goal of this prayer is to keep us moving in our spiritual life. We consider the thoughts, words, feeling, actions we’ve already identified, and we ask: What was I like today? What were my responses to what went on during my day? Whom did I not pay attention to, notice, affirm or assist? Did I ignore something that needed loving intervention? Did I put on a good front while stuffing things like jealousy, anger, disdain, impatience? Did anything raise a red flag about an important aspect of my relationships or another area of my life? Many days, questions like these will surface only small things. Once in a while though, I find a major “aha!” of recognition and insight into myself surfaces, and I need to return to it in prayer on subsequent days. Ignatius called this third step taking account of my soul. (If you are wondering about the “15 minutes” this prayer requires, the second and third steps together probably average 8-10 of the 15 minutes.)

The fourth step is to ask “forgiveness.” Again, I put this word in quotations because mostly what surfaces in examination of consciousness are failures, and failures lack malicious forethought and the intention to harm that characterizes “sin.” But faults and failures are what we deal with as we mature in our faith. We can get lazy about them. “No big deal,” “nobody’s perfect,” “compared to other people I’m not so bad,” we think. Without self-reflection or spiritual attention, our faults stop us from loving the people in our lives and loving God with our full capacity. Offer whatever surfaced to God, admitting you are a work in progress, and ask for forgiveness and help to keep growing.

The fifth step (and last) is to consider any changes or actions needed and to thank God for helping you to see where you have been in your soul’s journey this day.

There are other explanations of this prayer you can easily find, and perhaps another one will suit you better. It’s summertime now when many of us have a little more leisure. So maybe it’s a good time to try the examination of consciousness if you haven’t. Doing it regularly helps us pay attention to the invitations and promptings and actions of God in us, and so helps us feel God’s nearness. Paying attention is the foundation, I believe, of the spiritual life.

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