Finding and Serving God after Retirement

Edward McCormack

The examen prayer can foster an intimate conversation between the aging and God on a daily basis. The Triune mystery initiates and sustains the conversation, but the examen gives them a chance to respond to God's love each day.

For the past eight years, I have been offering spiritual direction and retreats to men and women who participate in the Ignatian Volunteer Corps (IVC). IVC provides men and women aged 50 and older opportunities to serve the needs of the poor, work for a more just society, and grow in their Christian faith by praying and reflecting in the Ignatian tradition. Two Jesuit priests, Jim Conroy, S.J., and Charles Costello, S.J., designed the IVC program to bring together the needs of the poor and people over 50. The program offers volunteers the unique combination of service to the poor, monthly meetings with fellow volunteers, and a process for spiritual reflection. IVC volunteers work with a wide range of service organizations, providing outreach to the developmentally challenged, immigrants, and refugees, children needing educational support, the elderly, victims of domestic abuse, prisoners, the homeless, and the dying. I function as a spiritual reflector for IVC, providing one-on-one companionship to the individual volunteers. In these private conversations, the volunteer shares his or her experience of working with the poor in the light of faith. Through my work with IVC, I have gained some insight into the needs of the aging as well as strategies for ministering with them.

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Most people who come to IVC are going through a time of transition. Many have recently retired, leaving behind a job that gave them meaning and an identity. Now they are asking themselves, who am I and what am I to do with my time? Although they are not in the prime of their life anymore, they have skills, talents, and a wealth of experience to share with others. They come to IVC filled with a desire to give back, do some good, serve the poor, and grow in their faith.

The IVC volunteers find their work with the poor exciting and very challenging. IVC places them in service organizations that expose them to segments society that are unfamiliar to them. These volunteers meet the “poor” and discover the frustrations and disadvantages they face on a daily basis: economic, educational, and social. They experience the messiness, complexity, and chaos of people living in poverty. Many find their work with the poor raises questions about the meaning of service: Am I really making a difference? Who is benefiting more from this work, the poor or the volunteer or both? Prior to joining IVC, many of the volunteers were professionals thriving in a world where productivity, efficiency, and results were valued. They soon learn, however, that efficiency and results are hard to come by when serving the poor. This makes the work meaningful, and at times, frustrating. Eventually, they discover that Christian service is about relationships, not results. They learn this is the Lord’s work: The Lord is working through them for the poor and through the poor for them.

The combination of contemplation and action, service to the poor with a regular practice of prayerful reflection, makes the program a transformative experience for most volunteers. The task of a spiritual reflector is to help the volunteers prayerfully reflect on their experience of serving the poor. IVC offers the volunteers a variety of ways to do this. In addition to working with the poor, they are asked to pray on a regular basis, keep a journal, meet with a reflector once a month, attend monthly group meetings, and make an annual retreat. These are very foreign activities for most of the new volunteers! In their meeting with their spiritual reflector the volunteers share their hopes, struggles, efforts to pray, their frustrations and breakthroughs. The reflector helps them listen to how the Lord is speaking to them in their work, through their relationships, and in prayer. Many volunteers find the process of spiritual reflection new and quite challenging. Until recently, they were very busy people with little time for prayer and reflection. The spiritual reflector encourages the volunteers to cultivate a habit of daily prayer, which includes some silence and solitude. A spiritual reflector will often ask volunteers to reflect on their experience of serving the poor by paying attention to their thoughts, feelings, and desires. They will also challenge them to notice where God has been in their experience. The volunteers are quite good at commenting on what works and does not work at their ministry site. However, they often struggle for words when asked to reflect on how they feel about their experience, where they find God in their work,
or how IVC is influencing their relationship with the Lord and others. Many of the volunteers find the process of spiritual reflection raises questions about their notion of prayer and their image of God and Christ. It is the task of the spiritual reflector to help them work through these questions and put into words their experience of the Lord in the service to the poor.

The IVC volunteers also bring with them the challenges that come with aging. Physical ailments often pose the most immediate challenge. They often struggle with high blood pressure, weight gain, lack of energy, mood swings, illness, surgeries, and diminishing health. They also carry the worry and burden that comes when their spouse, friends, and fellow IVC members struggle with similar ailments. The local IVC groups support each other as they struggle with these concerns through prayer and companionship.

Ministry and the Aging: Active Listening

A good spiritual reflector knows that the aging have two fundamental needs. First, they need someone to listen to them. Like all people, the aging want to speak with another person about their desires, fears, and hopes regarding their life and faith. For most people, to have someone listen to them is a rare gift, especially in our fast-paced world filled with multi-taskers. It is even more important for the aging given the life issues they face and their great battle with loneliness. Second, they need help making sense of their life experience and their relationship with God. This second need is particularly relevant for IVC volunteers who find the program challenging their faith, their assumptions about the poor, while giving rise to new gifts and experiences of God.

Listening is the most important thing spiritual reflectors do during their meetings with a volunteer. The kind of listening required involves empathy and understanding. It also includes a response to the speaker that conveys an appreciation for what he or she is saying. There is also a place for conversation and comments depending on what the volunteer is sharing about her experience. Nevertheless, good open-ended questions and listening are what is most needed. The spiritual reflectors listen as the volunteer recounts the joys and frustrations that come with serving the poor. They listen as the volunteer describes painful and positive memories (Lapsley, 250–251). They are attentive (and not judgmental) as the volunteer describes their health problems, their struggles with the church, their breakthroughs in prayer, and the many ways IVC has changed their lives.

A spiritual reflector also encourages volunteers to reflect on their experience of serving the poor. This is not always easy for them at first. Most volunteers are trained by our culture and their professional lives to expect results. At first their reflection is taken up with an analysis of the people they serve and the frustrating
elements of their ministry. A spiritual reflector can encourage them to go deeper in their reflection by posing the following questions: How are you feeling about your ministry? Where do you find God in your work? For some these types of questions move them to reflect on the thoughts and feelings stirred up by their service, while others become frustrated by such questions. Many of them are not used to reflecting on their experience and do not know how to find God in their experience. This is what can make the spiritual reflection process frustrating. During these experiences the spiritual reflector must do some coaching and offer encouragement. Volunteers must be encouraged to notice how they feel about the people they serve, the people they work with, and the work itself, especially in the light of the Gospel. A spiritual reflector must listen for how the volunteers relate to those they serve, whether they have energy for the mission, and how they handle discomfort and frustration.

*The Examen Prayer*

St. Ignatius of Loyola’s (1491–1556) *examen prayer* provides those who minister to the aging with a powerful tool for training them to reflect on their experience. The examen prayer is one of the many forms of prayer found in St. Ignatius of Loyola’s *The Spiritual Exercises*. This book is a manual written for those who guide a person through the four-week silent retreat known as the Spiritual Exercises. The Exercises are made under the guidance of a spiritual director. The four weeks are structured around the following themes: the love of God the Creator, the sin of the world and our participation in it, the incarnation, Christ’s ministry, crucifixion, and resurrection. The examen prayer can also be used outside the context of the exercises.

Spiritual reflectors find the examen prayer helps IVC volunteers make sense of their service to the poor and their lives in the light of their Christian faith. It puts them in touch with the generosity of God the Creator, their interior life, and the ways Christ works in them and through their ministry. It can transform their relationship with Christ and with those they serve while providing insight into their ministry.

The following outline of the examen prayer is based on Ignatius’s presentation of it in the *Spiritual Exercises*:

1. Transition: I become aware that I am dwelling in the loving embrace of Christ as I begin the examen.
2. Step one: Gratitude
3. Step two: Petition
4. Step three: Review
5. Step four: Forgiveness
6. Step five: Renewal

Although the five steps may seem artificial and rigid, they are not because they spring from a heart in dialogue with God (Gallagher, 103). The examen is a profoundly relational prayer. Each step corresponds to successive moments in any relationship of love: step one is an offer of thanks; step two is a request for help; step three is reflection on time spent together; step four is a request for forgiveness; and the last step expresses a desire to cooperate with the other. The examen plunges us into a relationship with God, creation, ourselves, other people, and our world. It trains us to recognize how God the Creator cares for us at all times. It promotes a Spirit empowered personal relationship with Jesus Christ who calls us to know him intimately and cooperate with his work in the world.

How does one pray the examen prayer? Ignatius believed prayer was more fruitful if a person prepared to transition into a prayer period. The transition into the examen prayer allows a person to move from the activity of the day into prayer. Begin by considering, for the length of an “Our Father,” that you are already in the presence of Christ who looks on you with love. Then recall the events of the previous 24 hours in a spirit of gratitude, thanking God for all the good you have received during that time. Do not rush through this step but allow the Lord to show you how the big and little things of your day are gifts coming from God. It is through those gifts that God loves you. A prayer of petition follows the prayer of gratitude in which you ask the Holy Spirit for two related gifts. First, ask for insight into the ways the Lord and the enemy influenced your decisions and actions over the last 24 hours. Then ask to see when you cooperated with the Lord and when you cooperated with the enemy. The next step is to review the events of the past 24 hours recalling your moods, thoughts, desires, and decisions. Pay particular attention to the times when you were serving the Lord and note the moments of energy and joy as well as moments of discouragement. After the review, ask the Lord to forgive any sin you committed in the past 24 hours. It is important to allow yourself to experience his forgiveness. The last step in the examen prayer moves from a focus on the past to thought about the future. Your reflection on the previous 24 hours will illuminate your future spiritual growth and the desires of the Lord. Each of us has a “to do” list. At this point in the examen prayer you ask the Lord, “What is it you want me to do tomorrow?” You are seeking to know which initiatives God desires you to choose and to put into practice. This will enable you to enter into various interactions responding to the desire of Christ rather than reacting to and being carried away by the dynamics of the situation. Conclude the examen by reciting the Lord’s Prayer.

The examen prayer is based on the Trinitarian worldview of St. Ignatius, which is found in the Spiritual Exercises. Ignatius understood all creatures and all people as coming from the Triune God. Creation is good, beautiful, and reflects the majesty
of the Trinity because the Triune mystery dwells in all creatures, continually creating them from moment to moment. Ignatius was also a Christian realist. He believed that God’s beautiful world was under attack by personal and social forces that sought to deface and destroy this world, especially humanity. The term Ignatius used for these forces was “the enemy of our human nature,” which represents all the anti-creation and anti-human forces in our world.

At the heart of Ignatius’s worldview is the crucified and risen Christ who labors in our world and in our lives through the Holy Spirit to rescue all humanity and creation from the enemy, while bringing about God’s new creation. In this context, Ignatius believed that the vocation of all humanity is to cooperate with Christ’s mission to heal and renew the world. The mission of Christ is the mission of the church, and all Christians have a role to play in it. A person discovers his or her role in Christ’s mission by growing closer to Christ. The Holy Spirit makes use of our gifts and talents while directing us to become co-laborers with Christ and other Christians in the work of healing, freeing, and transforming our world. The goal of Christ’s mission is to move all creation toward communion with the Trinity. Unfortunately, human beings live out their vocation in the midst of the battle between Christ and the enemy of human nature. Although we are called by Christ to be a new creation and to share in his mission, we are still infected by the sin of the world, which means our lives are in constant need of reform.

Notice how each step in the examen prayer corresponds to a key feature of Ignatius’s worldview. For instance, the transition corresponds to Ignatius’s conviction that our lives and our world are encompassed by the loving presence of the Triune mystery. The prayer of gratitude corresponds to Ignatius’s emphasis on the love and generosity of God the Creator. The prayer of petition and the review follow Ignatius’s belief that the crucified and risen Christ labors in our world and in our lives. Since God’s beautiful world is under attack by the enemy and we fall prey to that influence, we must ask for forgiveness after we review our day. The experience of forgiveness fits with Ignatius’s belief in the mercy and freedom of Christ. It also reflects his conviction that we are loved sinners. The last step, the renewal, corresponds to the Ignatian principle that all Christians are called to be co-laborers in the world with Christ. It takes Christ the King’s call to mission and translates it into a daily practice of cooperation.

**The Fruits of the Examen Prayer**

When the aging practice the examen prayer, they experience the various dimensions of Ignatius’s worldview. From beginning to end, the examen is an experience of God’s love manifest in Christ and the Spirit. The aging find the transition into the examen to be very powerful. They find the daily practice of recognizing that they dwell in the loving and compassionate embrace of Christ.
consoling and challenging. It acts as a daily reminder of how intimate God is with them. It also challenges their image of God and of themselves. Some have a hard time believing that God is this close and loving and that they are this loveable. For others, the transition confirms what they have known and experienced for many years about God's intimate and loving presence.

We live in a culture of abundance that trains us to take much that we have for granted. It dulls our sensitivity to the mystery and generosity of God and the gift-character of reality. In contrast to this cultural tendency, the examen begins with a reflection on God the Creator’s love for us—a love manifest in all the good we have been given in the last 24 hours. It keeps us in touch with God's constant creative love in our lives. IVC volunteers find this step in the examen promotes a sense of wonder, gratitude, and joy for what God gives them each day. They find they are less likely to take their spouses, friends, and health for granted. They more readily appreciate the majesty and mystery of God the Creator's abundant generosity. This practice also generates within them a profound trust in God's love for them. Over time, the daily practice of praying in a spirit of gratitude transforms how they view the people and events in their lives. They see them as gift and recognize more clearly the meaning in their life course. An eighty-year-old man told me he had been praying the examen for five years, and it was only because of this prayer that he discovered God's love for him. By contemplating the generosity of God in the good he was given each day, he realized God had been doing this for him his whole life.

The most challenging part of the examen prayer is the review. It corresponds to Ignatius's belief that we are simultaneously under the influence of Christ's love and the forces of sin. The examen asks us to pray in the power of the Spirit to discern how Christ has been influencing our decisions and actions in the past 24 hours and where the enemy has been influencing us. This calls for a practiced attentiveness to our feelings, desires, and thoughts as they influence our decisions and actions. It also requires an awareness of the influence of Christ and the enemy in those feelings and thoughts. The review forces us to face up to our own blindness, enslavement, and distorted ways of acting. It also helps us discover where Christ was at work in our day.

IVC volunteers find the review challenging and very rewarding. For those whose piety taught them that any focus on the self is self-centered, this step in the exa-
men is confusing. They need to be encouraged that by reflecting on their thoughts and feelings they can find Christ in their everyday lives. Some find this a new and exciting way to pray. Nevertheless, almost all the aging struggle with the effort to pay attention to their interior life. Coaching and encouragement is needed here, but it pays off. The aging report a growing awareness of the moods and thoughts that influence their decisions throughout the day. They start to notice when they experience a sense of energy, courage and insight as they seek to serve the poor. Gradually they learn this is an experience of the Spirit of Christ. They learn that they do not have to respond to every feeling and thought they have. This step in the review also teaches them to expect feelings of discouragement and frustration when it comes to serving the poor, and to resist them.

The request for forgiveness is an important experience in the examen prayer. At first, many volunteers do not understand this step, since they are doing some good and are not great sinners. Nevertheless, over time they become more sensitive to the ways they do not cooperate with Christ or simply take for granted God's generosity. The forgiving embrace of Christ seems to free them from some of their self-absorption and the habits that annoy their spouse. The mercy they experience from Christ they pass on to the people they serve and the people they live with. The real fruit of this prayer and the IVC process comes when their spouse notices a change in them for the better!

The last step in the examen prayer is the renewal. After reflecting on God's generous love and the presence of Christ in their day and having experienced his forgiveness, the volunteer who practices the examen finds himself or herself transformed into a new creation on fire with the mission of Christ. At this point in the prayer, they find themselves open to what Christ wants them to do and how he wants them to do it. It is this step in the examen that changes the volunteer from a person expecting results in ministry to a person seeking to cooperate with the work of Christ. One volunteer told me the examen is both practical and holy. She found it kept her prayer grounded in the everyday while revealing the mystery of God to her on a daily basis. It helped her find God's will for her in the good she tries to do, which filled her days with a sense of purpose born of constant contact with Christ.

The examen prayer can foster an intimate conversation between the aging and God on a daily basis. The Triune mystery initiates and sustains the conversation, but the examen gives them a chance to respond to God's love each day. God constantly speaks words of love to them through the gift of another day and the good people in their lives. They respond with gratitude and a desire to be generous as God is generous. God also speaks words of forgiveness, meaning, and mission through Christ and the Spirit. Each day they respond by accepting God's mercy and working to cooperate with the desires of Christ. They have embarked on a partnership of love that transforms their lives and the lives of others.
Opportunities to Grow in Spiritual Life

The Ignatian Volunteer Corps provides a wonderful opportunity for people 50 years and older to engage in service work while growing in their spiritual life. Those who act as spiritual reflectors for IVC know the important role that listening and the examen prayer can play in ministry to the aging. IVC is located in major cities across the United States (for more information contact IVC.usa.org).

References


