

Being a mother of little children can be the toughest role a woman will ever be called to. It is also potentially the most rewarding. But when finding time to simply take a shower or use the bathroom on your own is hard, prayer can feel impossible. That can impact our sense of worth before God. At night, during the three seconds between my head hitting the pillow and sleep overtaking me like an oncoming trailer truck, I would often think, "*Oh ugh, I didn't pray today. Again!*" It's very common in the exhaustion and life changes of motherhood, that prayer slips off the radar altogether. **Julia Roller** describes it like this, "*I knew I needed God. I was a mess; an exhausted, weepy, milk-leaking, sleep deprived, time bomb of a woman.*" I know I often functioned on auto-pilot.

Part of the problem was my restricted idea of prayer. I had heard about the need to set aside quality time, even up to an hour with God early in the morning. To always have the same place, read the Scriptures, light a candle, set a mood and make it the priority every day without fail. Only slowly did I learn, with the help of a very sensible spiritual director, that those mandates only set me up to fail. I regularly felt guilty for not praying 'properly' which kept me away from God even more. The constant sense of failure robbed me of the real relationship with God that was achievable at that time in my life.

Praying in the morning is a beautiful way to start the day, and can work well for many, but the thought of getting up earlier than my lark of a baby was overwhelming. Eventually I discovered a simple way of praying for about 5 minutes at night which linked to my real life, whatever had actually happened that day, and gave me a simple achievable heart to heart chat with God without guilt. It also helped me get to know myself better; a crucial part of growing in faith and love as a woman and a disciple.

The 'Examen' prayer is from St Ignatius, 16th Century founder of the Jesuits and no 'examen' is not a spelling error. The Examen is not meant to be an 'examination of **conscience**' where the focus so easily becomes my failures. St Ignatius wants disciples to focus on how we have been conscious or attentive to the presence of God and his love and goodness in our day.

First, you reflect on where you noticed or were attentive to God and His goodness in your day.

It can be as simple as momentarily noticing a rainbow. Being grateful for soft rain. Cradling a sleeping child, having the grace to count to 10 before reacting, getting a few moments to yourself, having a cuppa that was hot, receiving encouragement etc. It can certainly also be a 'religious' moment if one comes, but the intention is that we learn to recognise and be attentive to the sacred in ordinary life because God is 'Emmanuel' -God with us - and wants to 'abide in us and for us to abide in him. In colloquial terms, God wants to hang out at our place and be with us in our everyday especially when we are raising his other sons and daughters.

Second, you think of when and where you felt furthest from God. It's important not to turn this into self-criticism. The idea is to notice when you were operating on your own strength, or were being thrown around by emotions or events that happened in your day with no sense of God in the moment at all. Yes, it can involve when we may have followed a temptation and slipped into sin, but the focus is not on me and my sin. The focus is on my consciousness of God. What was happening when I wasn't attentive to God in the various moments of my day and how is that different to when I was attentive?

Finally, you talk to God about both those times. It is not meant to be a long discussion. Simply chat about the times you were attentive to God and the times when God seemed a million miles away. If you are tired, tell God you are tired and keep it brief. Ask for support in the areas you need it, including time for caring for yourself and pray for the Holy Spirit to help you be more aware of God's presence tomorrow.

That's it! Often, I go through the three steps quickly and fall asleep in peace. Other times I find myself lingering with God in thanks for something or working honestly, without fear or shame with something I need to grow in. It is joyful to reflect about those times when I feel close to God. I find that I don't even dread thinking about those times when I get angry or otherwise am less than my true self, because I feel secure asking forgiveness and getting the help I need for tomorrow. I even look forward to these nightly 'strategy' sessions with God. I feel less alone as a mother and they help me fall more in love with God who wants so much to hang out with me.

Yes, I might still be exhausted when I fall into bed, but this prayer makes it easier to share honestly with God rather than just feel guilty about prayer.

Prayer is relationship and I don't believe God cares much whether we do it at night or in the morning, just that we enjoy hanging out with Him and letting Him hang out with us in these busy chaotic joy filled challenging mummy years.

I still pray the Examen at night before I fall asleep, and I still get to be woken up in the morning by my early-rising boy leaping into bed for a cuddle. That is a God moment I can reflect on with joy each evening.

Julia Roller is the author of "Mom Seeks God"