

Holding what gives you life

A few years ago, while on retreat, I discovered a fine little book that has immensely helped my prayer life. Like so many of the best books on prayer, what makes it so excellent is its simplicity. It is called “Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life,” co-authored by Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn, and published by Paulist Press. It has the look of a children’s book, but that is intentional since it teaches us to be “childlike” when we pray.



The book shares a true story about how during World War II bombings, many children became orphans. As they remained in refugee camps after their rescue, they were traumatized and afraid – especially of becoming homeless, without family and without food. So someone came up with the idea that as they would go to sleep at night, they would give the children pieces of bread or little loaves of bread, to hold as they would go to sleep. They slept most peacefully because holding their bread reminded them the ““Today I ate, and I will eat again tomorrow.””

The reason this story is shared at the very beginning of this simple, 72-page book is because it illustrates for us of our need to “examen” – the spiritual practice, mastered by followers of St. Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits, of looking back in the evening upon our day we have experienced and asking ourselves, “For what moment today am I most grateful?” And also, “For what moment today am I least grateful?”



It is called the examen because, in prayer form according to the authors, it is a way of doing an “examination of conscience” which is one of the most important of all Catholic traditions. But in this vein, it is actually like “holding bread,” for it invites us, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to look thankfully at the moments during our day where we have found God’s presence. And, also, to humbly acknowledge the times we may not have responded to God/Christ and his inspiration and movements within, in conscience and heart (in the spiritual life, these movements and feelings are called consolations and desolations.) To notice these and reflect on them as a regular spiritual practice can help us grow in gratitude and virtue, and also fight temptations to discouragement and vice. I personally have found it most helpful. So, as a way of entering a national holiday weekend that has a very obvious spiritual tone:

What are you holding that gives you life? What are you thankful for: today – even in this very moment?

What a great question for us to “examine” ourselves as we gather at table with family and loved ones on Thanksgiving.