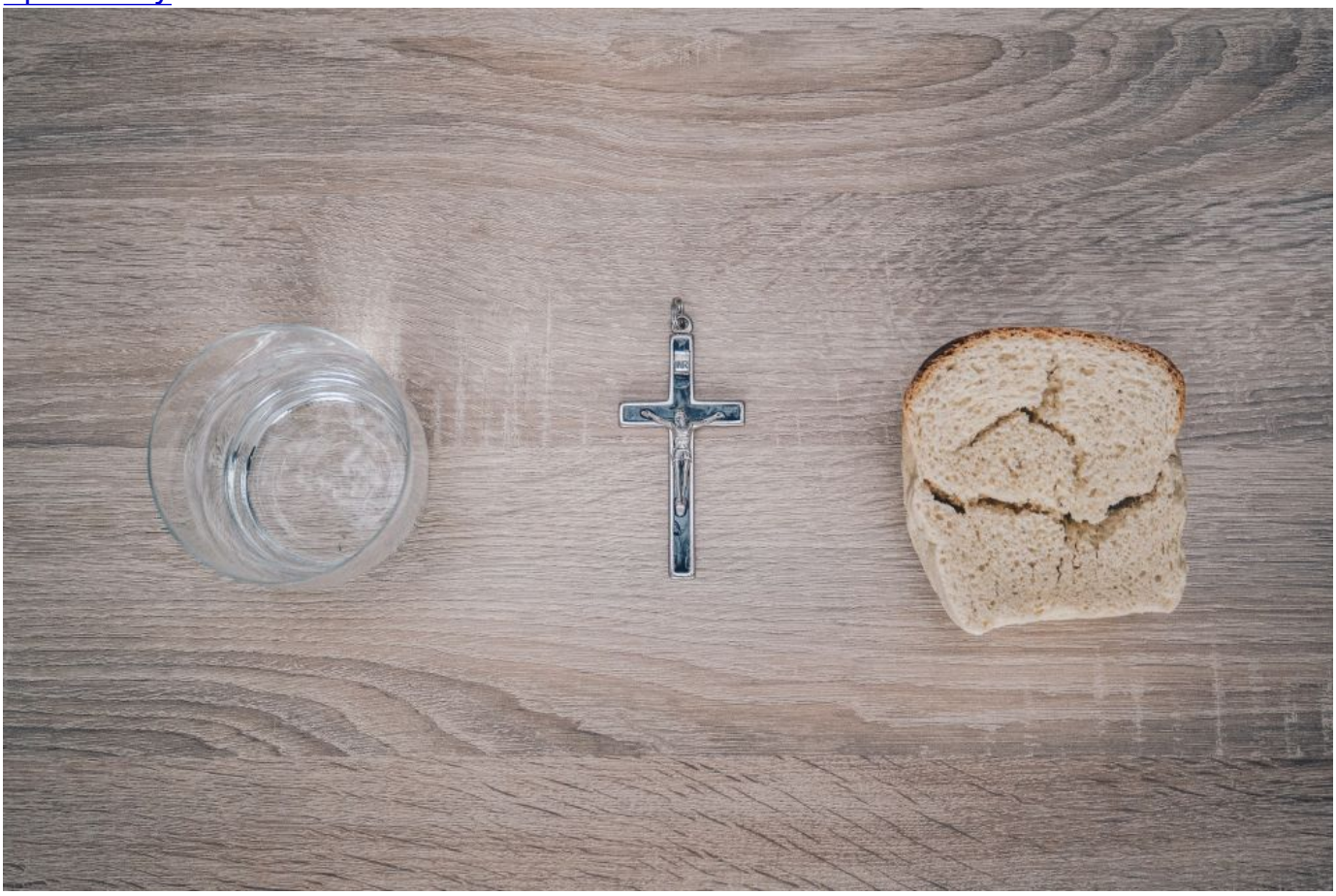
Voices of Sisters
Spirituality



(Unsplash/Kamil Szumotalski)



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Lent is here. It is one season that I always feel inadequate to undertake. But this time around I have been thinking about how to make my Lenten season more meaningful — before, during and after. I began to tune myself in for this yearly exercise.

Two factors for a desired experience and outcome came to mind: examen of consciousness and examen of conscience (I will explain later). The Lenten season includes three observances meant to bring us closer to God and our brothers and sisters, especially those on the margins. These are prayer, fasting and almsgiving.

I have always prayed, fasted and given alms every Lenten season, but I ask myself: Have they always left me a better person than I was before the season began? To be honest, many times I am left better, but perhaps not as improved as I wanted. This has caused me to reflect deeply and see how best to engage with this Lenten season.

Penance is also part of the Lenten season, with an emphasis on the examen of conscience, looking at where I have faith and asking forgiveness where I need to reconcile with myself, God and others — where I have done right or wrong. Though I have done this every year, many times the exercise remains at a superficial level and does not result in a deeper relationship with God. People may perceive me to be a righteous person, but my heart could be still far from God.

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This Lent, I am tasking myself to consider another level of examen — specifically examen of consciousness combined with the examen of conscience. Examen of consciousness is drawn from Ignatian spirituality. Jesuit Fr. George Aschenbrenner describes examination of consciousness as the awareness of how God is touching and moving me in my reality. In this examen, we review our experience of God drawing us (John 6:44) in our full consciousness. We also look at the way our sinful nature distances us from being intimate with God in the hidden state of our consciousness. It is about how God is touching us and the Holy Spirit is urging us on.

The examen of consciousness offers an experience of growing sensitivity to the unique, special ways that God's spirit calls us. There is an ongoing interaction between the individual and God. This leads me to realize that the examen of

consciousness can help me to make a better examination of conscience and consequently make my Lenten season bear lasting fruits.

As I spend my day facing various encounters, God invites me to something that demands that I give something of myself. I recognize this during the examen of consciousness. The demand made could be in the form of presence or material help to my brothers and sisters in need. I know I am gifted in many ways — including materially — and have qualities that can meet the needs of the people in my day. In a way, every situation calls forth something in me. Sometimes I am not aware of my gifts until I am confronted with a certain reality. The crux of the issue lies in the way I respond to these promptings.

To make a meaningful Lenten journey, examen of consciousness could help me to make choices concerning the quality and the quantity of what I want to give, in terms of material things, the time I want to spend in prayer, my disposition as I fast and my attitude toward almsgiving — including what I decide to give.

In examen of consciousness, I imagine myself sitting alone and holding in my hands a day with 24 hours, seven days a week, my possessions of all kinds and sumptuous food in front of me. I am aware of my need to link up with God in prayer, to deepen my relationship with him amid a busy day, in spite of fatigue at the end of the day and a sleepy head that longs for bed.

It also includes the recognition that I am also encountering people of all walks of life. Some have no livelihoods, and in some parts of the world (my country included) famine is almost a natural disaster. Additionally, I think of the people of Turkey and Syria after the devastating earthquake that claimed many lives, destroyed valuable property and left so many people homeless. This for me is a wake-up call. What must I do?

Blending the examen of consciousness and the examen of conscience can lead to sincere repentance and a deeper relationship with God and our fellow human beings. In the former, I look back at the way God has been drawing me through the encounters of my day. In the recent past I have come to appreciate a life informed by the Beatitudes: being poor in spirit; gentleness; mourning with those who are mourning; hungering and thirsting for uprightness; being merciful, pure in heart, a peacemaker; and being persecuted in the cause of uprightness (Matthew 5:3-10). These are pathways to follow, and when we look to see where God was in the course

of the day, we cannot miss him along any of these paths.

Following the examen of consciousness, we then examine our conscience. This is where we evaluate where we responded to the promptings of the Holy Spirit, and where we did not live according to God's will. Then we repent — which could include going to confession and starting again with renewed energy.

This is how I am choosing to observe this Lenten season. I trust that I will experience my own conversion and be right with God and the people in my life. This requires time and commitment and may feel tedious. However, Jesus tells us; "Until now you have not asked for anything in my name; ask and you shall receive and your joy will be complete" (John 16:24). Let us ask him to grant us the graces that we need to make this Lenten journey more lifegiving.