

Examen of Consciousness:
Finding God in All Things

A POPULAR METHOD OF PRAYER FROM ST. IGNATIUS AND HIS FOLLOWERS

By Phyllis Zagano

St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus, was a very practical man when it came to prayer. He recommended to his brothers a daily method of examining their lives so that they might better serve the Lord. St. Ignatius taught that the key to a healthy spirituality was twofold: Find God in all things and constantly work to gain freedom to cooperate with God's will. St. Ignatius proposed a daily exercise, which he called the *Examen*, that has been used by many Christians ever since. By praying the *Examen* twice daily, countless laypeople worldwide have joined the practice of Jesuits, other priests and religious—in hearing God's voice in their hearts. Through this daily practice, they learn to discern God's will and grow in the understanding of God's beautiful creation. Now called the *Examen* of Consciousness, it is a simple practice that anyone can learn and benefit from.

Making time for prayer

The *Examen* is not the same as an "examination of conscience," such as you engage in before meeting Jesus in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The *Examen* is a methodical prayer that helps you meet Jesus in your daily life, as he encourages you to do God's will. The *Examen* helps you grow in spiritual sensitivity and helps you recognize and receive God's care and assistance. St. Ignatius tells his Jesuit brothers that the *Examen* is the one prayer they should not eliminate; it is the one prayer they absolutely must engage in every single day. The *Examen* is a simple prayer, a prayer for busy people who are continually seeking to do the Lord's will.

There are five simple steps to the *Examen*, which should take about 15 minutes to complete. Many people make the *Examen* once around lunchtime and again before going to bed. This prayer can be made anywhere—on the beach, in a car, at home, in the library. It is often best, especially in the evening, to have a special place where you meet God.

Let's take for example the evening *Examen*, since it is the one most people can make most of the time. Whether you make it in the same chair you watch TV or read in, it is best to set off the time for prayer in some way. Try to be in a place where you are least likely to be disturbed, and where there is the least amount of external noise. Get up and walk around a bit, to signal the change of activity. Perhaps you light a candle or change the lighting when you pray. Then sit

comfortably, as straight-backed as possible with both feet on the floor. Feel God's presence and know his deep love for you, but try not to fall asleep. (God's presence is a great comfort—and often an aid to sleep!). You are about to enter into a deep and intimate conversation with Jesus, your closest friend, ally and advocate. All this helps you to enter into step one.

Recall you are in the presence of God.

“In [God] we live and move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28)

We are always in the presence of God, but in prayer we place ourselves in God's presence in an especially attentive way. God your Creator knows and loves you in the deepest way possible, and through Jesus his Son you have learned of your own beauty. The Holy Spirit, the manifestation of the love between the Father and the Son, guides and guards us too. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you look at your life with love this day.

Look at your day with gratitude.

“And Mary said: My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord....The Almighty One has done great things for me.” (Lk 1:46, 49)

After a few moments, begin to give thanks to God for the gifts of this day. Special pleasures will spring to mind: a good night's sleep, the smell of the morning coffee, the laugh of a child. As you move in gratitude through the details of your day, remember that every single event has been God's gift. The morning sun, the singing of the birds, perhaps a smile from the mail carrier or the kindness of a friend all point to God's love for you, personally.

God is found in the concrete details of the day, and this step helps us recall that every sunrise, every raindrop, every single breath we take is a gift of the God who loves us in the deepest possible way. As you take stock of what has been given you this day, take special care to notice what you received and what you gave.

After you review the special gifts of God this day, recall the gifts of your own creation. The special and perfect way God has made you brings God's grace to others. As you have participated in the body of Christ this day you have brought your own strengths—your sense of humor, your ability to cook, your strong hands and arms, your words of encouragement, your patience—to others, and all supported by your family and friends. Just as God the Father has sent Jesus to help and assure us of God's kingdom on earth, so Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to guide us as we gratefully receive and generously give life to others.

As you complete the review of your gifts and the particular gifts of this day, pause briefly to thank God for all these.

Ask help from the Holy Spirit.

***“When the Spirit of truth comes he will guide you into all truth.”
(Jn 16:13)***

In the next step after this, you will look at the ways in which you have responded to God’s gracious gifts and love this day. Before you move to that fourth step, ask here in a special way for the Holy Spirit to come into your heart and to help you look at your actions this day clearly and with an understanding of your own limitations. The Spirit will help you understand the mystery of your human heart, and at this point you ask to learn more about your actions and motivations. Remember, this is not a “beat up on yourself” session, where you will grind at the core of your being in sadness over things you have done wrong. Rather, it is a gentle look with the Lord at how you have responded to God’s gifts.

Review your day.

“Test yourselves to see whether you are living in faith; examine yourselves. Perhaps you yourselves do not realize that Christ Jesus is in you.” (2 Cor 13:5)

This is the longest of the steps. Here you review your entire day, watching it like a little movie that replays in your mind. Be sure to notice the details, the context of what happened and how you acted. As you look through the day, notice especially your interior motives and feelings. You are here looking for signs of those things that cause you to act with less than perfect freedom, given the circumstances of your life. This is not psychoanalysis, but it does bring a certain amount of psychological wholeness to you as you recognize small details.

When did I fail? Perhaps you were cross with someone, but why? God might prompt you to remember that it is really time to get new shoes! Or God might show you that the person reminds you of a long-lost enemy. Perhaps you were too tired to really work effectively. God might remind you that breakfast really is that important!

This fourth step is the key to effective discernment of your daily motives because, over time, some actions and reactions become habitual and automatic. If every time you drop an egg you shout a cross word, the Lord here might prompt you to take a look at two things: Why are you dropping things? And why are you swearing?

Please don’t try to fix everything here—or you’ll be up all night! The key to the *Examen* of Consciousness is to do just that: Examine just how conscious you have been of God’s presence and actions in your life. As you look through the day, hour by hour, to see how you interacted with what or who was before you, you will begin to learn that in many places you faced the day or the moment with

a divided heart. You may find you have a critical streak in you, and that you tended to judge what happened rather than seek a charitable explanation for it.

Someone may have cut you off at a roadway, for example, and you may have found anger and criticism welling up within you. Did you overlook the pregnant woman in labor in the back seat of the other car? As you notice what you were doing and whom you were with, recognize what you were thinking and what you were hoping for. Were you using the other person for your own gain? Or were you there to help? Or was it both? Many times we find we have mixed motives for our actions, but as we notice what caused us to act in the ways we did, we will notice as well opportunities to grow in faith and in hope and in charity.

When did I love? One or more of your actions may have been completed in near-perfect freedom. You can recall that you actually were able to choose a specific course that served the common good and the needs of the individual freely, without any “ulterior motive” on your part, in genuine love and charity.

This may be something very simple at first. Perhaps in the supermarket you stretched to get a can from the high shelf for an elderly shopper. Notice here if you acted completely freely and chose in charity from a number of possible actions. (You could have kept walking, even internally criticizing the elderly person for stopping you from your Very Important Things to Do; you could have helped the person and then spent the rest of the day telling everyone how helpful and nice you are; you could have helped but said something to make the elderly person feel insignificant.)

The particular course of action you took from among the many possibilities you saw will help you understand your life in freedom. That is the point of this method of prayer—to see how you can better live in freedom to receive God’s grace.

Habits and life patterns. Habits are an especially good thing to notice in the *Examen*. Perhaps you have a habit of setting out to the office porch for a smoke every morning. While smoking is not the best of habits, in the *Examen* you also need to look at what else happens. Is this the 10 o’clock complaint session for you and your friends? When you all meet to complain about how bad the boss is, how low the pay is, how stupid the hairdo is on the one in the next unit? If your daily habits are dragging down your freedom, in the *Examen* you will notice them very quickly. You will also begin to notice if specific people are causing you to be negative in your response to life.

See both the positive and negative. Remember, however, that the *Examen* is not all about negatives. Take this opportunity to see where Jesus has helped you to have a positive response to life as well. Maybe you could have accepted more help from Christ in one or another of your events this day, but if you did receive his suggestion then notice that as well. Perhaps you chose not to engage in a derogatory conversation about another person, or perhaps you felt a small ping

in your chest as you considered and discarded another sort of poor choice. These are signs of God's grace in your life. The daily *Examen* will help you to become more sensitive to them.

See other forms of God's presence. You will also notice the signs of God's grace that have come to you as well through all the ways in which Christ influences you: through God's people, the Body of Christ, and through his Word in Scripture. When you pray, here or in another type of prayer at another time during the day, Christ will help you better know where he is present and what he is concerned about.

These graces, the intuitions of the things God wishes you to do, will come inside and outside of other regular prayer in addition to this time in the *Examen*: the Mass, personal meditation, reading of Scripture and of spiritual books. You will continue to grow in God's love, but you will also recognize that you are the hands and heart, the eyes and ears, the very voice of Christ. This continual growth in freedom will regularly and continually help you to love your neighbor as yourself.

Reconcile and resolve.

“As the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in mine.” (Jer 18:6)

One of the hallmarks of Ignatian spirituality is repetition, and the *Examen* has built-in repetition. In the first and second steps, we ask the Spirit of God to guide us as we look at our day with gratitude.

In the third and fourth steps we ask the Spirit of God to guide us as we review our actions. The final step, our heart-to-heart talk with Jesus, is the fruit of that repetition.

Imagine him, your trusted friend, sitting right there beside you, or before you. Perhaps he holds your hands in his, and looks into your eyes. Perhaps the two of you sit side by side, a couple of old buddies looking out at the ocean. Here you talk with Jesus about what you did and what you did not do.

Maybe there was something you did wrong—not particularly sinful, but not particularly smart either. Now is the time to tell Jesus you are sorry, and to ask him to be with you the next time the same sort of situation arises. Remember all the good things, and thank the Lord for being with you when you avoided a wrong choice, or when you resisted an old temptation to unfreedom. Feel the sorrow in your heart when you apologize, but also feel the gratitude when you give thanks for God's gentle work inside your heart as he continually labors to make you more Christ-like, day by gentle day.

End the entire *Examen* with the Our Father.

Finding God in all things

“The Word of God is very near to you, it is in your mouth and in your heart for your observance. See, today I set before you life and prosperity, death and disaster...Choose life.” (Dt 30:14, 15, 19)

This small prayer, the *Examen* of Consciousness, is the heart of the spirituality developed by St. Ignatius Loyola and his followers. If practiced once or twice daily, it will help move you closer to the heart of Christ in all your thoughts and deeds. The point of it is to find the sources of unfreedom in your life—old habits, people, situations, conditions—that lead you to make cramped choices away from what would be God’s will.

The more we notice how we can change and move toward God like flowers to the sun, the freer we become. As God continually labors within us to make us more like His Son, we can either cooperate with his unfolding creation or freely choose not to. The choice is ours, and, like the prophets, Ignatius reminds us to “Choose life!”

Phyllis Zagano is author of a number of books, including *On Prayer: A Letter for My Godchild* (Liguori Publications, 2001) and *Ita Ford: Missionary Martyr* (Paulist Press, 1996).

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