

## A Method of Making the General Examen

From The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola  
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The Daily Examen is a technique of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God's presence and discern his direction for us. The Examen is an ancient practice in the church that can help us see God's hand at work in our whole experience.

### **"The first point is to give thanks to God our Lord for the gifts received."**

Ignatius once said that the most abominable sin he could imagine was the sin of ingratitude. He knew that an awareness of God's goodness and generosity is the foundation of our relationship with God. Once we recognize God's goodness, we spontaneously feel gratitude.

In this first point, we express gratitude for the experiences and encounters during the day that have been good or pleasant or meaningful, whether they seem trivial or important. We also express gratitude for the larger gifts we have received: our faith and our salvation, our life, our talents and abilities, significant relationships, whatever comes to mind.

As our spiritual life deepens, we become more and more aware that all we have is gift, given to us far beyond anything we might expect or deserve.

We might sometimes find ourselves in a mood of resentment or depression where a feeling of gratitude is hard to muster. At that time, it is all the more important for us to express thanks to God. Not to pretend to feelings we don't feel, but to acknowledge, at whatever level we can, the truth of God's goodness to us.

### **"The second point is to ask for the grace to know my sins and to root them out."**

Ignatius gives his second point a moralistic tone. The particular grace we are seeking here can be expressed more broadly as the light to see our life the way that God sees it, without the illusions and deceptions that we commonly live by. If we are to ask for this grace wholeheartedly, it is important for us to know how desperately we are in need of it. Psychology has shown that many of our true feelings and motivations are genuinely hidden from us. The unconscious part of ourselves can have a powerful influence on what we feel and how we act. Even apart from this, there is a natural tendency to rationalize our actions and to believe the sort of front we put on for other people. Or we can deny or repress unpleasant or embarrassing things about ourselves. Or we can have attitudes of self-deprecation or contempt that distort our view of ourselves and others.

The possibilities for self-deception are endless. To truly know ourselves is not something that we are able to do alone. We need to ask the Holy Spirit for the light that can reveal us to ourselves.

**“The third point is to demand an account of my soul from the moment of rising to that of the present examination, hour by hour or period by period. The thoughts should be examined first, then the words, and finally the actions.”**

The third point is the heart of the Examen. Our actions, words, thoughts, feelings can come from an internal source of freedom and openness to other people and God. Or they can come from what St. Paul calls the “flesh” or the “law of sin”; that is to say from the self-centredness that inhabits all of us. We examine the events of our day methodically in order to uncover the source and the direction of our life that day.

Ignatius suggests we move from thoughts to words to actions. However, it can be more fruitful to move the other way, to look at words and actions and then reflect on the real motivations, intentions and feelings that underlay them. Actions that are apparently good can be done for bad motives, such as a desire for praise. Such an action might be considered praiseworthy but really springs from self-centredness.

Some people are free from actions that are obviously sinful. But when we go to a deeper level of intention and feeling, we can discover that sin has a larger hold on our life than we suspect, that there are all sorts of subtle ways that we focus on self rather than moving outward, towards others and towards the Other.

The Christian life aims at a purity of intention, where all our actions spring from freedom and grace. At first we achieve this type of freedom only sporadically and often fall short. But we can grow towards it.

The examination of our day is not simply earnest introspection, it is prayer. It is going through our day with God, attentive to the inner feelings and desires which is where we experience God’s call in the midst of everyday activity.

**“The fourth point is to ask pardon of God our Lord for my faults.”**

Once we have reviewed our day, we may have come to a sense of the dynamic of sin and grace that has been operating in our life that day. The fourth point is our response to that awareness.

Insofar as we have discovered grace and freedom operative during the day, our response is gratitude and wonder for the work of God in our soul. Genuine freedom always comes as a surprise to us, because it involves a sort of self-transcendence that we know we don’t have in ourselves. When we discover that in our day, we need to praise God for it.

Conversely, when we discover sinfulness and self-centredness, our response is remorse and contrition. Contrition does not mean dwelling in guilt and shame and beating ourselves for not being perfect. It means recognizing our distance from God, our moving away from God, and asking for and receiving God’s forgiveness. The difference between contrition and shame is that contrition is a feeling that moves us out of ourselves and towards God. Shame simply moves us deeper into ourselves.

Like gratitude in the first point, we may not be able to deeply feel the contrition that is the proper response to recognition of our self-centredness. But it is important then to express it, even if it doesn't seem very deep, by asking for pardon.

"The fifth point is to resolve to amend with the help of God's grace. Close with the Lord's Prayer."

We end the Examen by looking towards tomorrow with the desire and resolve to effect changes in action or attitude that God has called us to today.

Alcoholics Anonymous has a slogan, "One Day at a Time" by which they mean that sobriety is not achieved by big and noble resolutions, but by trying to stay sober for one day.

It can be useful to look at our spiritual life in that way. We deal with it one day at a time. In this fifth point we don't look at changing our whole lives, we simply look at what we want to change tomorrow, and ask God's help for it. Our lives are a drama of sin and grace. But this drama is being played out on the rather humble stage of our day to day life.

Ignatius adds our need for God's grace, an important point. We are not resolving to perfect ourselves by force of our own will. We are resolving to open ourselves to grace through awareness of where we need it.

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