

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.—

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.—

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.—

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.—

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.

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

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!

Examination of Conscience



(The Examination of Conscience is adapted from Appendix III of the Rite of Penance.)

A. The Lord says, "You shall love the Lord your God with your whole heart."

1. Is my heart set on God, so that I really love him above all things and am faithful to his commandments? Or am I more concerned about the things of this world?
2. God spoke to us in his Son. Is my faith in God firm and secure? Have I been careful to grow in my understanding of the faith, to hear God's word?
3. Do I pray regularly? Do I offer God my difficulties, my joys and my sorrows?
4. Have I love and reverence for God's name? Have I shown disrespect for the Blessed Virgin Mary and the saints?
5. Do I keep Sundays and feast days holy by taking a full part, with attention and devotion, in the liturgy, and especially in the Mass?
6. Are there false gods that I worship by giving them greater attention and deeper trust than I give to God: money, superstition, astrology?

B. The Lord says, "Love one another as I have loved you."

1. Have I a genuine love for my neighbors? Or do I use them for my own ends, or do to them what I would not want done to myself?
2. In my family life, have I shown proper respect toward my parents? Have I been careful to give a Christian upbringing to my children? Have I been faithful to my spouse?
3. Do I share my possessions with the less fortunate? Do I do my best to help the victims of oppression, misfortune and poverty?
4. Does my life reflect the mission I received at confirmation? Do I share in the apostolic and charitable works of the church and in the life of my parish?
5. Am I concerned for the good and prosperity of the human community in which I live, **or** do I spend my life caring only for myself? Do I share to the best of my ability in the work of promoting justice, morality, harmony and love in human relations?

C. Christ our Lord says, "Be perfect as your Father is perfect."

1. Where is my life really leading me? Is the hope of eternal life my inspiration? Have I tried to grow in the life of the Spirit through prayer, reading the word of God, receiving the sacraments?
2. Have I imposed my own will on others, without respecting their freedom and rights.
3. What use have I made of time, of health and strength, of the gifts God has given me? Do I use them to become more perfect each day?
4. Have I been patient in accepting the sorrows and disappointments of life?
5. Have I kept my whole body pure as a temple of the Holy Spirit? Have I dishonored my body physically or through unworthy conversation or thoughts? Have I indulged in activities which offend Christian or human decency?
6. Have I gone against my conscience out of fear or hypocrisy?

(The following prayer is adapted from Appendix II of the Rite of Penance.)

Almighty and merciful God,
how wonderfully you created us
and still more wonderfully remade us.
You do not abandon the sinner
but seek him/her out with a father's love.
You sent your Son into the world
to destroy sin and death by his passion, and to restore
life and joy by his resurrection.

You sent the Holy Spirit into our hearts to make us your
children and heirs of your kingdom.

You constantly renew our spirit
in the sacrament of your redeeming love, freeing us
from slavery to sin and transforming us ever more
closely
into the likeness of your beloved Son.

We thank you for the wonders of your mercy,
and with heart and hand and voice
we join with the whole Church
in a new song of praise:

Glory to you through Christ
in the Holy Spirit, now and forever.
Amen.



Returning to the Sacrament of Reconciliation

Celebrating and receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation can be among the most blessed of human experiences. Yet, there are a number of reasons why we don't take advantage of this Sacrament or we don't celebrate it well. Fear, shame, bad experiences of the past, a long time since the last reception of the Sacrament or bad habits in celebrating it now are all possible reasons for struggles with this Sacrament. The solution is so simple. A simple understanding of the Sacrament and a small encouragement to give it a new try, with a new expectation, can literally change our lives and will certainly renew our faith.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation is God's gift to us. In the story of the Prodigal Son, Jesus tries to tell us that God is simply waiting for us to "come home." In the story, the father is not only waiting, he is out by the road longing for the wayward son to return. And when the son begins to give his practiced speech of repentance, the father interrupts him and shouts orders to begin the celebration. Jesus is telling us that this is how God feels about our reconciliation. It isn't about our having to shame ourselves or face being scolded. It is all about letting ourselves receive the merciful and healing love and peace that only God's love can give us.

What does serious sin look like? How do I examine my conscience?

First of all, let's consider what serious sin is. According to the teaching that many of us learned in our catechisms or religious education, there are serious sins and less serious sins. A serious sin (often called "mortal" sin) because it mortally wounds our relationship with God. To say it another way, when we see what a serious sin is, it will become clear to us that it is a choice which involves turning my back on my relationship with God, freely and deliberately. Less serious sins (called "venial sins"), involve weakness and patterns of sin in our lives. They are sins, for sure, and involve "missing the mark" of what it means to be a follower of Jesus, but, as we will see clearly, they don't involve a free and deliberate choice to turn our backs completely on our relationship with God.

For something to be a serious sin, three things are required. All three of them are necessary. It must be something quite seriously wrong. It must be something I do, knowing its seriousness and knowing that it is wrong. And, it must be something I do deliberately, that is, freely. So, for something to be a serious sin, I have to understand that something is serious enough to ruin my relationship with God and freely choose to do it anyway.

When we examine our consciences, we are looking primarily for things like that. And, we are looking for them in two areas: in what I've done and in what I've failed to do. For example, I might never have abused my children, verbally or physically, but I might examine my conscience and recognize that I failed in my responsibility to raise them in the faith - the commitment I made at the time of my marriage and at their baptisms. However, I might judge that, though it is a serious matter, I didn't do it deliberately and intentionally. In that case, I might examine

this situation in terms of my overall selfishness or failure to live my commitments - perhaps venial sins in the area of what I've failed to do, but for which I can ask for forgiveness and healing so I can do this better in the future, or receive our Lord's peace, even if I can't fix the past.

Our Sins Are Forgiven

We must never forget what happens in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Our sins are forgiven! They are taken away. The slate is wiped clean. We have a new beginning - a fresh start. We receive God's mercy and are filled with God's peace. And, once this total and complete forgiveness happens, deep and lasting healing can happen as well.

So, it's a great idea to return to the Sacrament of Reconciliation and to receive a fresh start and to let the grace of healing begin. Most of us are ready to do that because we really miss communion with our God. We really don't like division, conflict, selfishness, negativity, disorder, injustice or dishonesty. We long for integrity and a love which nothing but this Sacrament can offer us.

Considering Four Sets of Circumstances

Every single one of us is completely unique. All our situations bear the unique circumstances that make up our lives. These four hypothetical examples considered here are made up to allow us to understand four types of situations which might prevent us from coming to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. They don't represent any real persons or actual situations, but all of us will recognize why circumstances like these might keep us from celebrating the Sacrament. These examples will then help us consider how to choose to act on the invitation to come back to the Sacrament, if our situation is even remotely similar to these made up circumstances.

1: "It's been a long time and a long list of big sins are frightening me."

"I suppose my last confession was 20 or 30 years ago - the last time I had to go with my parents, when I was in high school. I haven't gone mostly because I'm ashamed of my past. And, when I get right down to it, I'm really embarrassed to tell a priest I've been going to Communion all those years. I figured people would see through me and see what a major sinner I am, if I didn't go to Communion. I know I shouldn't have done that, but I did. I was promiscuous in high school and college. I experimented with drugs and risked the lives of others while driving drunk or stoned many times. I lied and created all kinds of fictions to cover-up my activities. The worst thing I've done is when I was a sophomore in college, I got pregnant. [or, if the person is male: the girl I was going with got pregnant] I was so terrified that I panicked and had an abortion. [or, if the person is a male: I was so terrified, and so was she, so I paid for her to have an abortion]. When I was engaged, before I got married, my spouse and I slept together the whole time and we eventually moved in together to save money. All during that time, and after we were married, we practiced birth control. I can't even tell you the number of times I've lied. I'm ashamed that I stole something at work. It was stupid, but I did. I've cheated a little on filling out my taxes for years, but I figured that everybody else does, too. I have impure thoughts and I sometimes masturbate. And, I have all the flaws other people do: I'm impatient and judgmental. Of course, we sometimes missed Mass on Sunday and Holy Days and I didn't confess those. So, you can see why it is hard for me to go to Confession and actually tell all this to a priest."

Our Lord's message to anyone remotely carrying baggage like this imaginary person is a message full of great news. First of all, this is what the Sacrament of Reconciliation is all about. It is an invitation to give ourselves a chance to experience the incredible freedom of forgiveness and a new beginning. No one is going to judge us. We won't get interrogated. We'll experience God's mercy, as we never imagined. We don't need to hold on to all this stuff any more. And, once this is all out of the way, and we are no longer holding on to the guilt of it all, we can begin again to live the adult life of a follower of our Lord. So much healing will follow the forgiveness.

2: "It's been a long time, but I don't think I do that much wrong."

"I suppose my last confession was eight or ten years ago. I sort of got out of the habit. I used to confess the same small sins over and over and I just said, 'What's the use?' I don't commit big sins. I go to Mass every Sunday. I know I'm not perfect. The people I live with and work with would be the first to tell you that. I think I try to do good for my neighbor. I just got away from going to Confession. I just tell the Lord I'm sorry and that's that."

The message our Lord has for this set of circumstances is an encouragement to enjoy the benefits of the Sacrament of Reconciliation more frequently, as a means to grow in our Lord's grace and his peace. More frequent confession will often lead to a better examination of conscience. It may be the case that we won't have any serious sins to confess - even when we consider what we have failed to do. However, examining how we have fallen short in a variety of areas will usually result in our discovering places we need forgiveness and healing. We can ask for God's grace to shine in our hearts and to free us to love more generously and selflessly. The results are often wonderful: we have a personal experience of renewal that begins a new relationship with our Lord and a daily pattern of prayer with him.

3: "I go frequently, but I confess the same serious things over and over again."

"I celebrate the Sacrament at least two times a year, and sometimes monthly. It's a bit embarrassing because I keep confessing the same pattern over and over again. [Anger and fighting with a spouse or particular person; an ongoing affair; a pattern of pornography use with masturbation; etc.]

I know that I intend to have a 'firm purpose of amendment,' but I can't seem to change, and I keep coming to Confession because I want to keep going to Communion, but I wonder if I should."

It is so important to keep coming to the Sacrament. We need God's grace and mercy. Without it, our efforts to stay close to the Lord are even more handicapped. The issue for us is to change our patterns. Some of our patterns might be deeply embedded habits and may require a genuine commitment and the help of others. Others may have become addictions which require therapy or a 12-step program. What starts to change our hearts is to focus on leaving the celebration of the Sacrament with deeper and deeper gratitude. The more we thank our Lord for his love and mercy is easier it is to resist temptation. Secondly, it is very important to put a pattern of prayer in place in our lives so that, throughout the day, we are saying "Loving, Father, my life is in your hands," or "Thank you for your grace today, Lord," or "I trust you will be with me in this challenging situation I face this afternoon." These kinds of "amendments" to our lives will make our celebration of Sacrament lead to effective healing.

4: "I go frequently, but I confess the same venial sins over and over again."

"I celebrate the Sacrament at least once a month, and sometimes weekly, but I often begin by telling Father that I have no mortal sins to confess. It is usually just confessing my impatience and my tendency to judge others. I often confess my pride and my envy of others who have more than I do. And more and more I've been just confessing I can't concentrate on my prayer or when I'm at Mass. I don't know if going to Confession is helping me any more."

The enemy of our human nature, the Evil Spirit, would love to have us just quit trying and would love even more to separate us from the Sacrament of God's mercy and peace. We can first of all make sure that we are examining our conscience on what we might have failed to do. Have we been as charitable and generous as we could have been? Have we fed the hungry, clothed the naked, visited the sick or imprisoned, in whatever ways we've heard our Lord's call to do those things? Have we exercised our civic responsibility and formed our consciences to hear the cry of the poor and follow the teachings of the Church regarding our role in the world and civil society? There are many ways we can come to a renewed sense of repentance, after years of confessing only the same things. After making sure we have not missed some serious sin in our examination, we can celebrate the Sacrament by being deeply grateful that our Lord has kept us from serious sin. We can then ask his grace to help us with the deep patterns, like impatience or judging others, for example. Offering us the grace of healing can be such a help to our being a witness to holiness and to our service of others.

Preparing, planning and celebrating

The greatest fruit in the Sacrament of Reconciliation will come if we take the time to prepare well. It takes real prayer and grace to come to this Sacrament well. It takes planning to say what we want to say well. This is all part of the time of grace that allows God to work in us and prepare us for a grace filled encounter. Finally, it is so important to come to the Sacrament as a celebration. This is an occasion for great joy and deep peace. It is a time of sincere expectation of grace to be given to us. Whatever Penance the priest offers us - "as a remedy for the healing desired" - we can all come forth from the Sacrament, giving thanks and praise for this experience of power of the Incarnation, Life, Death and Resurrection of Jesus touching my heart this day. This was all for me and it was for this moment. When we say "Amen" to this grace and open our hands and hearts to then receive the Eucharist and say "Amen" again, we experience the full meaning of the Communion with Jesus given to us in these two Sacraments together.