

The *Examen* Handbook

A Guide for Leading Others
through the Prayer of the *Examen*



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Theology of the Examen

Spirituality

Spirituality is the way a person makes sense of, or makes connections between, themselves, others, creation and the Other. There are many spiritualities according to different faith traditions (eg, Christian, Buddhist, Muslim) and many spiritualities within each of those traditions. There are some spiritualities that do not include God (eg, some New Age spiritualities).

Ignatian spirituality is defined in a few ways. The most succinct formula is “finding God in all things”. One of the early companions of Ignatius described it another way as “being a contemplative in action”. Both say the same thing. For Ignatius, the world is user-friendly. You can find God “outside”. Monks contemplate God mainly in their chapel choir stalls. Jesuits find God “in action”, in their engagement with the world as well as in church.

When Ignatius founded a religious order (which he never originally intended) he ensured that his men were not to be tied to monastic communities like the monks or friars for prayers, but were to be free to be on mission and trusted to say their prayers individually rather than communally. God’s presence was not to be tied to a church or chapel or prayer room, but found in all things.

For Ignatius God is certainly to be found in traditional ways (scripture, liturgy, sacraments, etc) but also in creation, in human history, and in other people. And God can certainly make himself present directly (eg, appearing to Moses, to St Paul, in Jesus, and to many saints, including St Ignatius. But God more often reveals himself indirectly – in manifestations, little epiphanies, tell-tale signs, God’s traces.



The Basis of this Ignatian Spirituality

Some critics have said this Ignatian spirituality is simply the error of pantheism, that is, everything is God (God is the mountain, God is the tree, God is the other person, etc). Not so – this spirituality proposes that God is to be revealed in the beauty of a mountain or a tree, or that God’s Spirit dwells in the other person. God, the Creator, is at all times greater than his creation.

Our starting point is incarnational theology. It is a theology that is rooted in this world. Not an “up there” or “other worldly” approach. The world is God’s creation and God’s gift to us. God has affirmed its goodness, for example, in the Genesis creation account – “God saw that it was good”. Then, in a cosmic act of emptying and compassion, God’s Son took flesh (in-carnation) and became one of us. Therefore creation is doubly sacred – as God’s gift to us and with God’s indwelling. Incarnational theology holds that God is to be discovered working in human history, in ongoing creation of the world, and in ourselves.

Ignatian theology and spirituality is easy to teach and to appropriate, because it springs from our lived experience.

Ignatian spirituality is holistic (complete, all-round). If our Jesuit educational philosophy embraces the formation of the whole person (mind, heart and hands), then our spirituality embraces the whole world. We do not impose a spirituality on the world, but sensitively discern the presence of God already active in the world. So there is no dichotomy, but a synthesis of matter and spirit, body and soul, reason and faith, culture and belief.

Each informs the other. There is no partitioning of the world, two realms, God’s kingdom versus the world, neither speaking to the other. Rather there is a complementarity. Grace builds on nature.

Those with an Ignatian spirituality experience a God who may be encountered on a weekday, as well as a Sunday. They can point out the face of Christ, not only in sacred icons that adorn our walls, but also in the faces of our sisters and brothers. God is to be found in class and in chapel, in learning and in living, in ourselves and in the other.

The Examen

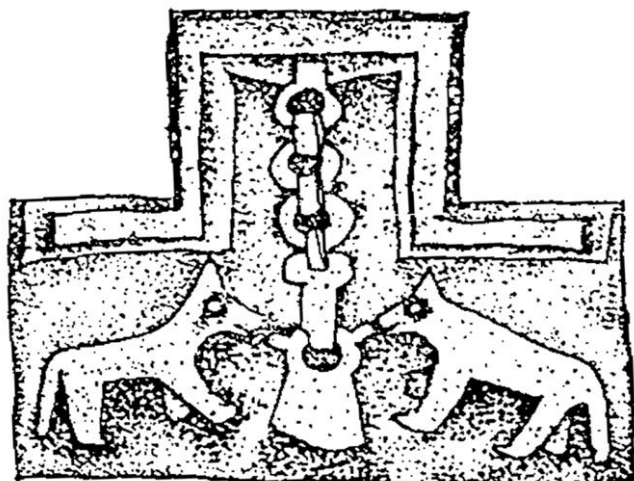
On the basis of this theology and this particular spirituality, Ignatius encouraged his followers to use a particular prayer wherein the pray-er would recall those moments in the day when they felt God's presence, and those times when we might have drifted from God. It goes by various names: **The Examen, Awareness Examen, Examination of Consciousness (not Conscience only).**

It is called *Examen* (from the Latin) not meaning an exam or a test (and therefore a "pass" or failure") but more like a "review" of progress. It is called an *Awareness* or *Consciousness Examen* because it is a review of how you have been aware, or conscious of, God's presence in your day. It is not only an *Examination of Conscience* (which, in the traditional sense, is a review or tallying of one's sins, usually before confession) though this might form part of it.

It is easy to review the day. We have a natural facility for it. How many of us can easily re-enact a quarrel we had during the day? How readily we think of that cutting, clever thing we might have said to our foe! But we also know how to re-live good and precious moments of the day — intimacy, friendship, God's peace. Such recollections can even make you smile again. We all have that ability. The *Examen* builds upon that capacity.

In practising the *Examen*, we consider questions like:

- where did I meet God during the day?
- how attuned am I to God speaking?
- what is leading me away from God?
- how do I block God?



Effect of the Examen

Regular use of the *Examen* in prayer reminds us of God's active presence in the ordinariness and the extraordinariness of our day. It also reminds us of where we have been navigating off course, bearing away from our true selves and away from God.

In addition, for the purposes of refining our skills of discernment (making right choices in important matters), the *Examen* keeps us in touch with the movements within our heart that are reinforcing what our true desires and hopes for ourselves are – what is life-giving and ultimately fulfilling (and therefore what God wants of us, too).

General Format of the Examen

(Some Background for Staff to Explain the Sequence)

1 Sense of God's Presence and Thanksgiving

Have the boys become still with some centring (stilling/quietening) exercises. Since this prayer is about interiority, ask the boys to sit comfortably, put things out of their hands, quieten down, close their eyes (they may like to rest their heads on their arms if they are at a desk). Invite them to leave all distractions, "busyness", thoughts of things to be done, aside. Be still. **[This could take about 20 seconds.]**

Invite the boys to thank God for something (one thing will do) for which you are grateful today. This reminds you of your relationship with God: Creator and creature, Giver and gifted. **[This could take about 15 seconds.]**

2 Prayer for the gift of the Spirit – Enlightenment

Have the boys ask the Holy Spirit for the gift to review the day (or the time since the last *Examen*) honestly with integrity – not to be selective, not to filter out the less-than-good, but to be objective and see themselves as they are. Or, maybe they could ask for the gift to see the day through Jesus' eyes. **[This could take about 15 seconds.]**

3 Review of the Day

When asking the boys to review their day, ask them to recall simply the most significant events or feelings. What was significant? Where was their heart lifted? Where were they touched by the God's Spirit? What event do they enjoy remembering? What do they think was the basis or the cause of the enjoyment? What was God saying to them there? Where was there any negative or false spirit (or Spirit) at work? What did they learn? What do their actions, thoughts, desires, feelings, tell them about their relationship with God?

Encourage them to stay for a time with what is fruitful. They should not feel driven to spend time with every feeling and experience of the day.

Not too many words or instructions here – give them space to let the memory surface. Prompt and stand back. **[This might take 2 minutes.]**

4 Response

Ask them to have a conversation with God. Talk to God (or Jesus) about what was significant. Maybe contrition (an expression of sorrow for something recalled) is appropriate. If there is no conversation, then it is not strictly prayer, but simply a review of the day or a self-help exercise – and this is also valuable! **[This might take 20 seconds.]**

5 The Future

What help might they ask of God for tomorrow? Is there something difficult ahead, a challenge? Do they need to be reconciled with someone? **[This might take 20 seconds.]**

Conclude with a simple well-known prayer (eg, *Glory Be*, *Lord's Prayer*, *Prayer for Generosity*, *Hail Mary*) and Sign of the Cross. Invite them to "come back to the room", to the present, when they are ready.

COLLEGE DIARY

AWARENESS EXAMEN

1 First try to relax and be at peace.
Thank God for something you are grateful for.

2 Ask God to help you look back over the day.

3 & 4 Ask yourself:

What are the good things that happened to me today?

What good things did I do today?

I thank God for all these things.

Now ask yourself:

What was not so good about today: the things that annoyed me, frustrated me, hurt me, mad me feel sad?

Ask God to help you with these things.

I also ask myself what things did I do today that were not so good.

I tell God that I am sorry for these things.

5 Now look ahead.

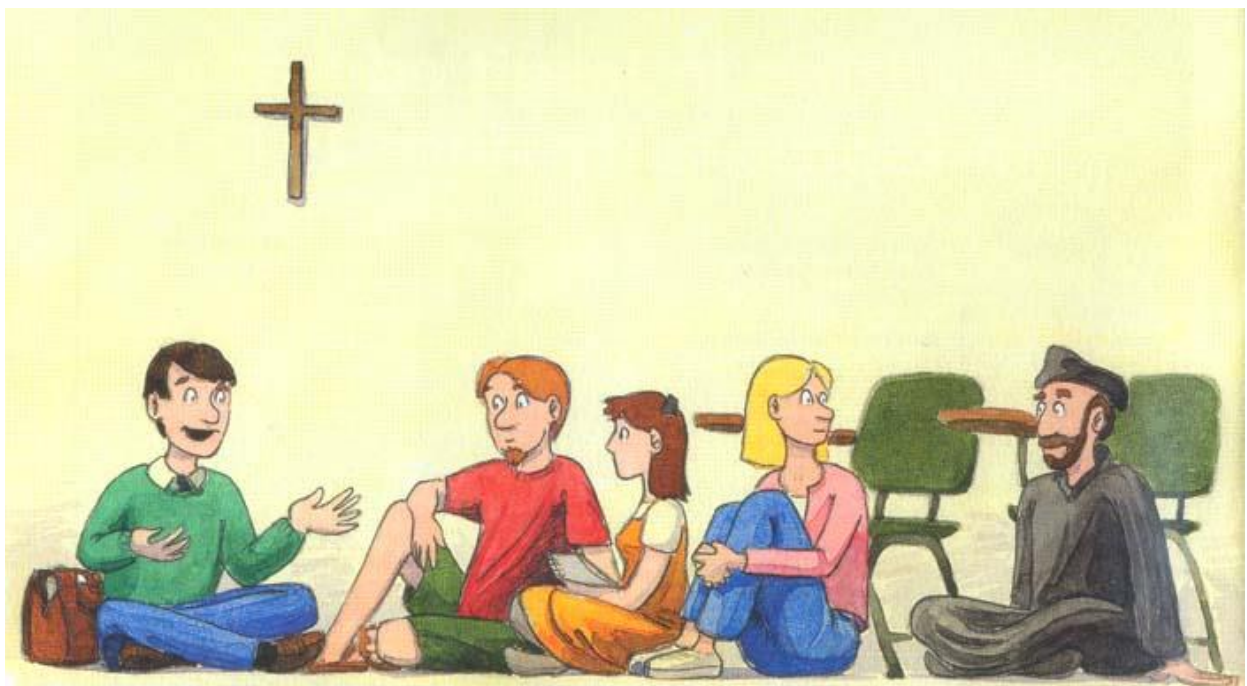
Ask God to help you be a better person tomorrow than today.

Finish with the prayer that Jesus taught us: the *Our Father*.

EXAMEN FOR YOUNG BOYS

- 1 Begin with some centring, quietening down. Maybe rest heads on hands on desk.
- 2 Thank God for something special you are aware of.
- 3 Go over the day in your mind.
What was the best thing I heard?
What was the best thing I saw?
What was the best thing someone did for me?
What was the best thing I did for someone else?
Is there anything I regret or feel sorry for?
- 4 Tell something to God about your day as a friend talks to a friend.
- 5 What can I do to improve tomorrow?

Conclude with a “Glory Be”.



EXAMEN FOR OLDER BOYS

1 Quiet and Thanksgiving

Spend a moment settling down and letting go of distractions. Clear our minds.

As we look over the day, we seek to appreciate all the good things that have happened to us and to thank God for these.

2 Asking for Insight

We now pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit to help understand ourselves better. We ask for the wisdom to see ourselves more clearly.

3 Looking at Our Day

Now ask yourself how we have spent our day. Why do we act the way we do? Is it from love? Generosity? A deep desire to be helpful to others? Is it from selfishness? Pride? Fear? Confusion? Tiredness? Frustration? How have we felt today? What is the source of those feelings? As we ponder our behaviour today, we begin to see patterns and connections, which open our eyes to our own goodness and generosity as well as our weakness and self-centredness.

4 We Ask Forgiveness

We now turn to Christ, admit our sinfulness and ask forgiveness. Whilst this is a moment of sorrow, it is also one of wonder and gratitude at God's love, and of desire to do something for God.

5 Looking to Tomorrow

Finally, as we look to tomorrow, we ask for God's grace and help. We ask to touch particularly those areas, which have come into focus during our prayer. Are there some attitudes in us that we would like Him to change? Are there some decisions we need to make? Would we like to be more sensitive to God's presence in our day? Ask for what you need.

Conclude by saying the *Prayer for Generosity*.

THE I/WE EXAMEN

- 1 Relax in the presence of God. Be aware of God's loving presence in, and all around you.

Thank God for everything God has loved into your life since your last Examen.

- 2 Beg to be given the 'mind and heart of Christ', to see the reality as Jesus sees it. Reflect prayerfully over your day.

- 3 Go through the day with the Lord, checking the "WE", what Jesus and you experienced together, against the "I" alone.

As you reflect over the day, then, see everything about which you can say "WE" (even if you were not conscious of His presence at the time). For example: WE ate breakfast; WE went off to work; WE did our chores; WE were truthful when it really mattered.

And see what you cannot say "WE" about, but have to say "I". For example: I got angry with those children; I judged that person rashly; I failed to be kind to that one.

- 4 As we prayerfully reflect over our day in this way, God makes us keenly aware of the ways in which God touches us and is present to us all during the day. It is clear when we have walked other ways. Talk to God about it.

Renew in love your sorrow for ever disappointing or offending our Father, and convey that to God.

- 5 Accept an invitation God gives you to repair any damage, and behave better next time you face the same kind of situation in which you failed today.

End by praying the *Our Father* slowly.

THE FACES OF OTHERS EXAMEN

1 Become still and settled. Let go of all that is drawing your attention away from this moment.

Give thanks to God for all the people's faces that come into your life. Whether they test you or bring out the best in you, they have Christ dwelling in them – even if in heavy disguise.

2 Ask God for the grace to see Christ in all the faces you have encountered this day.

3 Review the day so far (or the time since your last *Examen*). Recall some of the significant people you met or with whom you conversed or interacted.

Which were the good experiences? The faces you always welcome? The ones that brighten up *your* face and *your* day. Why do they affect you this way?

On the contrary, which are the faces that annoy you? Or intimidate you? Which are the hostile faces? Why is that? Could you change that reaction or that outcome in any way?

Where are the faces you chose to ignore? The ones from whom you look away? Where you did not want to become engaged? Where your presence, your greeting, your conversation, could have made all the difference.

4 Talk to God about those faces you looked on with life and energy; where you looked with fear and anxiety; and those faces from which you chose to look away.

5 What do you want to do tomorrow, with God's help?

Conclude by asking Mary's intercession with the *Hail Mary*.

THE NOVICES' EXAMEN

1 No matter what I am worrying about ... Stop! God is with me - quiet perhaps, but always there. Everything I have is a gift from God. Is there something that I would especially like to give thanks for today?

2 I ask God to shine his light into my heart so that when I look back over the day I may be able to see God working in all things that happened.

3 Now I remember through the day starting from when I woke-up.

I remember the people that I met and the things that have happened. On the whole, was it a "good" or "bad" day? Was it a normal day, or unusual in some way? Whom did I meet during the day? Did I come across something surprising? Does something special come to mind?

In all the things that have happened, how did I feel? Was I joyful or sad, angry or frightened? Maybe I felt great and was really happy?

What caused my feelings and did they change during the day?

God guides us through our moods and feelings. Normally, the way of God is (in a deep sense) peaceful and consoling. If your day was disturbed or if you were uneasy, can you sense where that uneasiness was coming from? We are affected by many different feelings. The better we come to know these influences, the easier it will be to see the perhaps subtle movements of God in our lives.

4 An important question to ask is: what can I be proud of today? I will give thanks for this.

But also, did I turn away from God during the day? Maybe I turned a blind eye when it suited me?

I will say a prayer asking forgiveness for anything I may have done to ignore or hinder God's love during the day that has passed.

I will ask especially for the graces of healing and strength.

5 The final part of the prayer is to look forward to tomorrow.

We are people of hope. Let us remember that God will be with us then.

Let us bring the prayer to a close by praising God with the *Glory Be*.

THE MONDAY EXAMEN

Reviewing the Weekend Sport

1 Become still and settled. Let go of all the distractions that are occupying your mind at the moment.

Give thanks to God for all the opportunities that co-curricular life at school, or in your local club or district team, is bringing you.

2 Ask God for the grace to see the movement of the true and false spirits moving in your heart in your weekend games.

3 In your mind's eye, go over the weekend match, race, or competition. Begin with the journey to the venue. Then move to the time when you met up with the team. What were the conversations/anticipations like? Recall meeting with the coach – the encouragement and advice.

Remember the game. What were the highlights? When were the feelings of exhilaration? When did you sense a real team spirit? On the other hand, when were you down or dispirited? How did you deal with that feeling? Did you turn it around? Or did it lead to negativity?

If you won, did you do so in the best way? We all know of “bad losers”, but were you “bad winners”? If you lost, what do you recall of the way the team or individuals acted? Was there any “blame game”? Whatever the outcome, what significant words or conversations do you remember? Do you admire them, or regret them?

What did you learn about yourself? The team? About what is important?

4 Is there anything you would like to share with God about the game? What will you say? Do you need to express sorrow or regret for anything?

5 As you look forward to next week's encounter, is there any grace or gift or help you would like to ask of God?

Conclude with the *Prayer for Generosity*.

THE FREEDOM EXAMEN (James Rodgers, adapted)

- 1 Relax. Feel open. Open your heart. Put things out of sight, out of grasp, out of thought. Let go. Recall that we are in the presence of God. We are always in God's presence but here and now, we place ourselves in God's presence. Give thanks for *one* thing, one gift I have been given, one trace of gold I have found.

- 2 Ask for help from the Holy Spirit. Ask the Spirit to come into our hearts and help us freely and honestly review the happenings of our last day.

- 3 Look back briefly and re-live our day with gratitude. Recall the events. What gifts have I received today? What gifts have I given? I thank God for all of these, their source. In the words of Peter Steele SJ, "each breath a gift; each glance a blessing".

- 4 Search for the movements of our heart which may have been divided between helping and disregarding, listening and ignoring, criticising and forgiving, speaking and silence.

This is not a time for dwelling too long on shortcomings but a gentle look at how we have not used or else mis-used God's gifts. Do not let the false spirit be undermining. With hope, ask for help or forgiveness.

- 5 Look ahead to tomorrow. Have a heart-to-heart with Jesus. Ask for direction, for support.

Finish with Ignatius' prayer, the *Suscipe*:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my understanding
and my entire will.

Take, all I have and call my own.

Because, whatever I have or hold, you have given.

So, I return it all to you and surrender it.

Give me only your love and your grace.

Because I am rich enough and ask for nothing more.