

GRACE, The Ignatian Examen

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One of the most regularly given pieces of advice in the history of Christian spirituality is the regular examination of conscience. Many people do it just before going to confession. But Saint Ignatius of Loyola recommends that we make it a daily prayer by reserving about ten to fifteen minutes at the close of each day, or at some other moment when we can steal a bit of quiet from our busy schedules.

1. Gratitude

Begin, he urges, with a moment of gratitude, and try to be specific – think of something about the day that is just past, or about something in your life for which you are grateful, and say a word of thanks to God. We often talk about counting our blessings, but actually stopping to give God thanks for some of his particular blessings can easily escape us, despite our best intentions.

2. Request for Light

Then ask of God the light by which to see your life, as he wants you to see it. This request for his light is most important in making the examination of conscience into a genuine prayer, and not just another self-help technique, done purely by our own will power. Even the best of us has some areas of our life we'd rather not look at, and others we can't stop gazing upon. Given our enormous powers of rationalization, we need God's help in coming to see ourselves truthfully as he sees us.

3. Account of One's Actions and Attitudes

Third, make an account of all your actions and attitudes in the course of the day just past. This is likely to be the longest portion of the examination of conscience. If one perseveres in doing it faithfully, day after day in the Lord's light, it can reveal the patterns of sin as well as the patterns of grace in one's life.

Some portions of the day can be reviewed quickly, like a videocassette on fast-forward, but over certain moments we will do well to pause and go slowly, watching to see what triggered what. With God's grace we can notice where things like impatience and anger start and how they grow. And we can come to see just how God's grace may have protected us from jealousy or gossiping. We can take note of just what those "near occasions of sin" really look like, so that we can avoid them a little better tomorrow and not just excuse ourselves from what takes too much effort to change. The standard by which to judge what we have done will always remain the ten commandments, especially when recast by Jesus as the two great commandments about love of God and love of neighbor.

It can be helpful in this third stage of the Examen to spend about a minute simply listing the things we did in the course of the day. After that, we can choose what to look at in greater detail. For this part of the third step, it is often helpful not just to be doing our own analysis but literally to tell the Lord how it went in detail. One might, for instance, talk to Him about a particular

conversation that we had, or a specific event. Usually we know when we are telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! But if we find that we are exaggerating something, or hiding something, or twisting something, all we need to do is to say: “Well, Lord, it wasn’t quite like that. Let me try again to tell You, a little better this time, what really happened. You know it already, but You want me to know what really happened. I thank you for being willing to listen to me, and for drawing out the truth from me in this way.”

One other suggestion for a practical problem that we sometimes face in their lives.. After some angry encounter or something deeply upsetting or something that they are ashamed of, many people feel the inclination to “play the tape” over and over again during the course of the day. But this inclination to replay often does no good, and may even be harmful if we start subtly changing the scenario so as to come out a little better each time we reconsider the matter while the other guy comes off a bit worse. It is usually better to treat the inclination to replay these tapes during the day as if they were temptations. Resolve instead to wait until you get to your prayerful examination of conscience, and only then to allow yourself to review the matter under the Lord’s light so as to see the situation in truth and charity.

4. Charting a Course

The fourth step is to chart a course, that is, to make a resolution about what direction to take, whether it be to continue the course you’re already on, or to correct your course when you’ve strayed. If your account of the actions and attitudes of the day has alerted you to anything of sin, you will be all the more prepared for your next confession and can make an Act of Contrition right on the spot. If you find that things have gone well, you will have ready-to-hand something to be especially grateful for when you begin your next examination of conscience.

5. Entreat the Lord for the Energy and Enthusiasm Needed

The final portion of this short prayer is to ask God for the energy and enthusiasm to carry out the course just charted. In all honesty, we cannot save ourselves, no matter how hard we try. But we cannot fail if we take the help God is so eager to offer.

This method for the examination of conscience is easy to remember by the letters in the word “Grace”: (1) Gratitude, (2) Request for God’s light, (3) Account of Actions and Attitudes, (4) Chart your Course, whether by continuing on course or correcting it, and (5) Entreat God for energy and enthusiasm. Not only will one be more ready for confession when the time comes, but one will steadily grow in recollection and a sense of God’s constant presence.