

## **St. Ignatius' Examen has been curing spiritual blindness for 500 years.**

The following spiritual exercise is taken from an article written by a Jesuit priest,  
Father Robert McTeigue, S.J

Saint Ignatius offers a form of meditation known as the Examen. Some Jesuit scholars refer to it as the *Examen of Consciousness* to distinguish it from the examination of conscience we undertake while preparing to make a good confession. The Examen is a way of taking note of our spiritual vital signs daily so as to heighten our awareness of the temptations to sin and the invitations of grace that constantly surround us. Practiced faithfully, the Examen can keep us alert to the unique patterns of light and dark that are at work in each of us, so that we can learn to cooperate with one and resist the other.

### **Saint Ignatius introduces the Examen in His “Spiritual Exercises” in five simple steps.**

1. *“The first point is to thank God our Lord for all the good things I have received.”*

Saint Ignatius was a great advocate of the habit of gratitude. As I gratefully recall the gifts, graces and mercies I have received since I last prayed the Examen, my heart is disarmed. Overcome by God's generosity, I can dare to come to terms with the mix of light and dark in my own life. When every other resolution fails, there will always be a reason to be grateful. Anyone who has said, “This time it will be different!” knows how easily determination and promises can sputter. But if I join awareness of reasons to be grateful with a commitment to prove my gratitude in each moment, in each decision, and especially in each time of temptation, then I will be well on the way towards making the spiritual progress we all so often tell ourselves that we desire. Real, lasting spiritual progress always starts with gratitude.

2. *“The second point is to ask for the gift of recognizing my sins and getting rid of them.”*

In other words, I ask for the Holy Spirit to illuminate this time of prayer. I wish for this time of prayer and its aftermath to be more than just the product of my own human efforts. I ask to see myself and my day as God sees them. Note that Saint Ignatius calls such vision a “gift.” No one indicted for a crime ever receives the indictment as a gift. But one who knows he has every reason for gratitude will want to be rid of every sin that is unworthy of the giver of the many gifts he has received.

3. *“The third point is to demand an account of myself from the time I woke up to the Examen, going hour by hour, or taking successive blocks of time. I examine thoughts first, then words, then deeds.”*

At this point I review the record of my day, taking note of what went on around me, what went on within me as a result of what went on around me, and what came from me as a result of what went on around and within me. As I pray the Examen over time, I note patterns of sin and grace and I note what strengthens or weakens those patterns. Armed with such heartfelt knowledge, I can with God's help take concrete steps to change for the better.

4. *“The fourth point is to beg God's pardon for my failures.”*

If I've cut corners on step 1 (gratitude), the fourth point will be painful in a way that is most unhelpful. If I focus exclusively on the fact that I am a sinner, rather than a loved sinner, eventually the raw honesty of the Examen will be too burdensome to bear and I will eventually stop praying the Examen all together. The goal here is that I, the beloved of God, having failed Love, nonetheless in gratitude to Love wish to be reconciled to Love and learn to be free to respond to Love worthily.

5. *“The fifth point is to determine to amend, by the grace of God.”* I think this is the most important step in the Examen. I am not looking for mere insight from praying the Examen; I am striving to be transformed by praying the Examen. At the fifth point I ask myself, “What is the grace God wishes to bestow upon me during the rest of this day? What will my day look like if I accept that grace?” And here I must be as specific as possible. It will be a temptation to pray vaguely. For example: “Um, so, well, I was rude and selfish this morning ... so, um, well ... I guess God wants me to be more nice to people, um, so well ... I guess from now on I will be more nice. Amen.” No! If a man recognizes during the Examen that he has been hardhearted towards his wife, then he must, by God’s own light, see how, when and where he will be charitable and merciful to her that very day. And he must see how he must ask for her forgiveness, resolve to do so, and plan accordingly. The fruitfulness of the Examen is directly dependent upon how specific step 5 is made. Vague resolutions about vague shortcomings can only lead to vague and fruitless attempts to reform. Step 5 is a hopeful resolution for the future. It is not wishful thinking.

So, that’s the basic pattern of the Examen. When should you pray it and how long should it take? Typically, praying the Examen should take 10-15 minutes. Start praying it once a day, and see if, over time, you can work up to twice a day. Saint Ignatius expected Jesuits to pray the Examen twice daily, once at mid-day and once in the evening. As you begin to pray the Examen, experiment, find a time of day that works for you, and stick with it. Remember that the Devil does not want you to pray the Examen, because it is a powerful tool for attaining spiritual freedom. I strongly suggest that you find an accountability partner. Your spouse, your best friend, your spiritual director, your confessor—someone—with whom you can check in and say, “Yes I was faithful to the Examen today” or “No, I let the Examen slide today.” Remember, vagueness and squishiness are your enemies here; clarity and concreteness are your allies. The Examen recommended by Saint Ignatius has a track record of nearly 500 years. Those who are faithful to the Examen experience spiritual growth marked by clarity and decisiveness, as well as growing freedom from illusion and compulsion. Above all, you will be able to see that God is at work around you and within you, calling you out of the desert of daily thoughtlessness where all too many spend far too long.

**Father Robert McTeigue, S.J.** *is a member of the Maryland Province of the Society of Jesus. A professor of philosophy and theology, he has long experience in spiritual direction, retreat ministry, and religious formation. He teaches philosophy at Ave Maria University in Ave Maria, FL, and is known for his classes in both Rhetoric and in Medical Ethics.*