

IGNATIUS EXAMEN

By Mike Kipp

Historical Background

Ignatius was born in 1491 in the Basque country of Spain. He was the last of thirteen children born into nobility and raised in the family castle of Loyola. Ignatius enjoyed the privileged life and reflected its characteristics. He became rather addicted to gambling, dueling, romance, and other worldly lures.³

In 1517, at the age of 26, he joined the army. Four years later he found himself defending the fortress in the town of Pamplona against the French. During the battle, a cannonball wounded one of his legs and broke the other.⁴ The wounds were serious, and Ignatius was forced to return to his family's home in Loyola. He was required to remain in bed for months. During this time he requested books to read and was given *The Life of Christ*.⁵ Upon reading this book, and reflecting on his messy personal life, Ignatius experienced a dramatic conversion. As a result he sold all his worldly possessions, wore only sackcloth, and set out to visit the city of the Lord's birth.

Although his broken leg was set, it did not heal. It was therefore necessary to break it a second time in order to reset it correctly (all done without the benefit of anesthesia). Ignatius was not expected to live. However, in late June he took an unanticipated turn for the better. The broken leg did heal, but was shorter than the other. The rest of his life Ignatius walked with a limp. This limp became a constant reminder of his previous life. Ignatius died in 1556 at the age of 65.⁶

What the brief bio above does not explain is the vital connec-

3. Foster, Richard J., and James Bryan Smith, eds. *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (San Francisco: Harper, 2005), 193.

4. <<http://www.luc.edu/jesuit/ignatius.bio.html>>. Accessed November 21, 2007.

5. Foster and Smith, *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups*, 193.

6. <<http://www.luc.edu/jesuit/ignatius.bio.html>>. Accessed November 21, 2007.

tion (which we will visit shortly) between Ignatius' life as a wealthy and worldly person and the legacy he left us in his writings as a Christian. Undoubtedly the most well-known of his writings is *The Spiritual Exercises*. In *The Exercises*, Ignatius outlines a considerable number of practical approaches to applying Jesus' teaching to our lives. We are specifically going to investigate only one of that large collection of exercises. This one is known as the *General Examen of Conscience*.

This exercise is, as its name indicates, a method to take stock of one's general state and spiritual fitness, or to examine one's conscience. Let's begin by looking at this exercise as Ignatius wrote it:

- ✿ *The **first** point is to give thanks to God our Lord for the benefits I have received from Him.*
- ✿ *The **second** is to ask grace to know my sins and rid myself of them.*
- ✿ *The **third** is to ask an account of my soul from the hour of rising to the present examen, hour by hour or period by period; first as to thoughts, then words, then deeds.*
- ✿ *The **fourth** is to ask pardon of God our Lord for my faults.*
- ✿ *The **fifth** is to resolve, with His grace, to amend them. Close with an Our Father.⁷*

Although a bit awkward to our contemporary eyes and ears, the general thrust of the *Examen* is not lost. Ignatius instructs us to begin in thanksgiving (as the Apostle Paul instructs us in I Thessalonians 5:18 and elsewhere), move to self-awareness, and then deeper self-awareness. This leads to humility, forgiveness, and to a new resolve to put our sin behind us. The ending instruction of closing with an "Our Father" is simply a reference for repeating the prayer that Jesus taught His disciples to pray in Matt. 6:9-15 and Luke 11:1-4. To actually take the intentional steps, and necessary time and space, to do this thoroughly will certainly convict us of one of the many ways each of us falls short of God's ideal way of living—revealed to the world through the life of Jesus Christ. The point of taking this sort of "exam" is to facilitate one's self-awareness of their daily living. The point is not to dwell on one's sin, but to see it as it is—a break in relationship with God and others—and

7. Tyson, John R., ed. *Invitation to Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Anthology* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 251.

IGNATIUS EXAMEN

seek to correct it. Only when we take the time to reflect on our daily lives do we slow down enough to recognize things we would have missed otherwise. We may see the good we have done, but more often we “skim over” the things that are not as pleasant to remember. That is the point of the particular attention given to one’s sin.

In light of the fact that the first half of life Ignatius was admittedly selfish and pleasure-seeking, it strikes me as quite notable that he could so capably create a very practical and simple method of doing a general examine of one’s conscience. It could be interpreted that his close acquaintance with such self-centered thinking (and subsequent behavior) served to compel him to closely scrutinize this area in his life, and to realize it was necessary to do so very regularly. In doing this, he ended up helping others look closely at their own lives and thus avoid the common pitfalls found there. So it seems that the predominantly selfish life that Ignatius led during his first thirty years uniquely prepared him to write *General Examen*. This writing not only helped him to live more in step with Christ, but continues to help all those who take his writing seriously. It is remarkable how God takes the whole of our lives—no matter how sordid—and makes good of them and good come from them!⁸

Lost in Translation

After his conversion and pilgrimage to Jerusalem, Ignatius decided to better his education. In the midst of his studies, his leadership qualities and deep passion for following Christ won him the friendship and following of many. In 1541 this group of friends formed the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits. At the age of 50, Ignatius was elected as the society’s first general.⁹ The society’s ministerial focus was primarily education. Ignatius himself believed in “interior self-reform”¹⁰ as the pathway to Christlikeness (as *The Spiritual Exercises* indicates). In order to share these and many other important truths, the society took on educating people of all ages. Members of the society were held to the strictest standards and

8. Romans 8:28.

9. Catholic Encyclopedia online, <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14081a.htm>>. Accessed November 23, 2007.

10. Ibid.

were expected to watch their conduct closely. The *General Examen of Conscience* was an example of an exercise that would help a member take stock of their daily life, attitudes, and actions.

It is easy to understand how persons outside a strict order like the Society of Jesus could quickly lose the discipline (or never even consider the practice) that was required to do the difficult work of the daily, sometimes agonizing, inspection of one's own life and actions. For this reason it is not difficult to understand why the *General Examen* is not widely recognized or even practiced today.

Our Daily Lives

So often our lives are filled with continuous activity from the moment we awake till we collapse in exhaustion at the end of the day. So many of us have a multitude of demands and roles (co-worker, student, husband, father, son, and so on) we deal with everyday. Every waking moment is filled with responsibilities. Finding the time and having the energy to do the demanding labor required by the *Examen* can be quite intimidating. After all, when my life is constantly busy I do not have time to deal with the pain and disappointment that may be hiding just under the surface (which could arise in a moment or two of reflection). So instead of slowing down to consider how I am living, I keep the pedal down and speed through life, hoping someday to find a safe place to stop and rest. I “plug in” each day to get around having to speak to someone I want to avoid. I text instead of calling the person whom I acted impatiently with in fear they may confront me. I drive instead of walking the short distance I need to travel so as to desperately try and keep up with the hectic pace my life requires.

Intentionally slowing down to reflect on one's life is not a luxury afforded only to those cloistered in some hilltop monastery in Italy. No, rather it is an absolute essential *discipline* of anyone wanting to follow in the steps of Jesus Christ more authentically. When we move so quickly through life, we easily miss the ways in which we fall short in our mundane interactions with people. The careless word spoken because we were late, or the lack of patience with a child attempting to articulate something they found important, or a judgmental attitude toward a colleague who seems to have ample time to linger in conversation when deadlines approach. All these are examples that can be missed in the rush of life when we

IGNATIUS EXAMEN

do not slow down to reflect, which is exactly what the *Examen* invites us to do.

Making personal reflection a regular input in one's own spiritual formation is vital to guard against developing a callous exterior toward others. The apostle Paul instructs us not to be mistaken about the importance that Christ places upon not only our actions, but even our motives, which are often secret to everyone but ourselves. 1 Corinthians 4:5b explains the final judgment, saying that God will “*bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's (and women's) hearts.*” Our motivation must come under the Lordship of Christ every bit as much as our actions. All of our thoughts, actions, and motives must be submitted to Jesus' reign in our lives. We can become master rationalizers—particularly without accountability and personal reflection upon our daily encounters with others. However, with a regular time of Spirit-empowered personal reflection where God is invited into our reflecting and asked to point out our shortcomings, we can develop sensitivity to God's Spirit. This not only exposes our tendencies toward selfishness (sin), but also begins to enable us to avoid those pitfalls.

When we actively solicit His Spirit as we look over our day or week, we will be guaranteed to see some of our attitudes and actions that are not pretty. We must invite Christ into a personal encounter with ourselves. Who is a better accountability partner than Jesus Christ himself? It's one thing to ask a close friend for his or her perspective about our actions in a particular situation; it's very different to ask Christ His. Jesus not only sees things from our perspective, but also from the other person's! There is no other friend who is able to do that. Further, Jesus has our best interests in mind. Other friends may or may not. They may be dealing with their own needs, issues, and shortcomings (this is not an argument against personal accountability with a friend, which is vital. It's just a reality of our human condition).

So, how can we begin to incorporate the *General Examen* in our daily, weekly, or monthly routine of personal spiritual formation? Read on!

Rediscovering the Practice

Although many may find Ignatius' *General Examen of Conscience* to be useable right out of the box, not everyone will. For this rea-

son, I would like to suggest a new way of viewing these five points and some additional factors that might better prepare a brother or sister in Christ to use this important practice.

A slight reworking of the *Examen* language becomes the following:

- ✿ *First*, begin this practice in a spirit of thanks. Take several moments to focus on God and all He has done for you today (air to breathe, food to eat—not to mention His salvation and love) and thank Him.
- ✿ *Second*, invite Jesus to help you to become more aware of your selfish and sinful behavior and to turn from it. Spend a few moments preparing your heart to look at this area more closely.
- ✿ *Third*, spend as long as it takes to recount your day, from first waking up until now. Think closely about each interaction, your thoughts, words, and actions. Look for unpleasant attitudes and ungodly actions for the purpose of overcoming these in your life.
- ✿ *Fourth*, invite Jesus into these broken places you have discovered to forgive, heal, and strengthen you for His purposes.
- ✿ *Fifth*, ask for God's strength to change and live as Christ. Close with the Lord's Prayer (Matt. 6:9-13).

To earnestly take up this practice will not be easy. Be assured that in exerting the necessary discipline it will take to do the *Examen*, you will be working in partnership with God's very powerful and gentle Spirit to renovate your soul.

Allow me to suggest some things that may prove to be useful. *First*, it will be essential to find a quiet place away from others and any source of interruption. I would strongly suggest turning off your cell phone, unplugging your iPod, and generally finding a place of solitude in which to begin this practice. *Secondly*, it could be helpful for you (as it is to me) to light a small candle as a symbol of God's presence while you embark on this very humbling journey of self inspection. *Third*, do not attempt to do the *Examen* without ample time to invest. I cannot imagine doing any justice to these five steps in any less than 30-45 minutes. *Finally*, you might find it useful to keep a journal or some sort of log to track the kind of things that you find are places of weakness. This journal/log

IGNATIUS EXAMEN

may open your eyes to reoccurring sins and specific areas of struggle. This account that is created will serve as a caution for you in entering similar circumstances and alert you to places that you may not be well advised to enter. It could also help you see your spiritual progress as you watch how God enables you to conquer areas of struggle. In time, as you begin to know yourself and your tendencies toward sin better, this will enable you to have greater success in living a life pleasing to God.

If you find that after practicing the *Examen* consistently (exactly what is meant by “consistent” is up to the reader but I would suggest at least weekly for 6-8 weeks) there are particular sins in your life that are persistent and not seeming to diminish in frequency (or even increasing), do not be discouraged. This sort of growth can take time and long-term commitment to overcome. Spiritual maturation does not occur in a few weeks. It, like physical maturity, is a long-term process. Often it comes very slowly. At times it comes in spurts. Yet, given the right input, it *will* come.

Don't Walk Alone

The Christian life is not an individual sport; there is not a single technique that will guarantee success—especially quick success. Often it is the persistent discipline that moves us forward over the long term. Further, inviting others into our journey can prove vital. Finding like-minded individuals with whom you can share both your struggles and triumphs is necessary to ensure your own sanity and faithfulness. No one, including Jesus Christ, walks this path alone, so do not attempt to do so by yourself.

You may want to seek out another brother or sister (my strong suggestion is that it would be a person of your same gender) with whom to practice this discipline. The two of you could meet weekly, *after* your own private time of completing the *Examen*, to share your findings. Pray for each other and hold one another accountable on issues important to your lives. Obviously, it is not essential to share every detail of the *Examen* with one another. However, as this friendship grows and trust is proven, you may find that you are drawn to do that very thing.

The people with whom I have had close, accountable relationships know *everything* about my life. They know it all, and still they love me and accept me as I am. These are the brothers that have

been Jesus Christ to me. They have proven invaluable to my growth in Christlikeness and my ability to accept and love myself.

Final Thoughts

The *Examen* was created by a once very sinful man. He became well acquainted with his own faults. I believe that it was through this understanding, coupled with God's grace, that he overcame his past and grew so much that many now remember him as *Saint Ignatius*.