

From his reflections on how God acted in his own life and his experience in directing others, Ignatius Loyola was brought to understand that God normally acts in us, not through extraordinary experiences, but rather through the ordinary events of our everyday lives. But here it is not the events themselves that are key, but rather the affections they evoke in us: the feelings of joy, peace, hope, anxiety, sadness, and fear we commonly experience in our everyday lives. These feelings, he realized, are not meaningless human emotions, but rather the means by which, through faith, we can recognize God's actions in our lives, urging us toward one action or away from another. He understood that if we wish to live in accord with God's desires for us and then act in this manner, we will naturally feel a sense of rightness, peace and joy. Yet finding ourselves anxious, unsettled, or sad as a result of our actions indicates that we are probably acting in a manner contrary to God's desires for us.

It is important to recognize what this is saying. God's creative action in our lives didn't end at our conception or birth. It is going on for each of us right now. The God of infinite love is actively engaged in the life of each of us at this very moment – laboring in us, Ignatius would say – offering us direction and guidance to help us achieve the fullness of life for which God created us. What we need to do is listen.

Ignatius' response to God's ever-present action in his own life was to frequently open himself to God in prayer so as to seek God's direction and guidance. It was a prayer we know today as the examination of consciousness. This should not be confused with the examination of conscience, which focuses on the morality of our actions, primarily on how we have failed, and is commonly used in preparation for the sacrament of reconciliation. The examination of consciousness, on the other hand, is a prayer of simple attentiveness to God to discern how God is acting in our lives, to what God is urging us, and what within us may be resisting God's action. It is a Spirit-guided prayer that expresses our desire to encounter God in the busyness of our day and to respond as promptly, fully, and generously as we can. It is important to recognize, however, that the examination of consciousness is, first and foremost, prayer – and like all prayer, it is meant to draw us into a loving relationship with God. Moreover, it opens us to finding God, not only in prayer, but in everything that comprises our lives. In other words, it opens us, as Ignatius so famously said, to finding God in everything. (The examination of consciousness is often referred to by its Spanish name, “examen” – but pronounced like the English word “examine.”)

The 14<sup>th</sup>-century classic of Christian mysticism, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, concludes with the following sentiments: “It is not what you are or what you have been that God sees with his all-merciful eyes, but what you desire to be.” The examination of consciousness really begins with desire: the desire to open ourselves to God, the desire to look honestly at our lives, the desire to respond generously to God's love. Our encounter with God in the examination of consciousness will never happen as long it is simply one more thing to be done in our already busy day. It is only when we truly desire to open ourselves to our loving God that the examination of consciousness will become part of our everyday lives.

As with all prayer, it is important to find a suitable time and place for the examination of consciousness. It is often done toward the end of the day, though it can be done at other times or more often, as we feel drawn to it. It can be made in our room, in our car on the way home from work; during an evening walk in the neighborhood – the possibilities are endless. The exercise takes about ten or fifteen minutes.

In his *Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius described the examination of consciousness. He suggested five steps:

**Transition:** Before we begin our prayer, we pause for a moment to place ourselves before God who loves us and welcomes us, the God who enlightens us and guides us. We embrace God dwelling within us, the God who is continuously laboring in us.

1. **Gratitude:** We begin our prayer, as we should really begin all prayer, by expressing our gratitude to God for all that God has given us today. But we do not simply ponder the people, places, things, and events of our day-to-day lives; we do this with God. We seek to experience a heartfelt awareness of how everything is a gift of our loving God: not only the pleasant, but the unpleasant as well, so that we might truly appreciate that “all things work together unto good for those who love God” (Romans 8:28). Thus stirred by profound gratitude, we will desire to respond generously to our loving God.

We recall all that God has given us today. We bring to mind simple things like a good night’s sleep, the smell of morning coffee, a generous gesture, a kind word, a thoughtful action, a stranger’s smile, a job well done, a piece of music that lifts our heart, the ability to see and hear and speak and walk, the food that nourishes us, the shelter that protects us, the opportunity to learn and grow as a person. We bring to mind the people who reveal God’s love to us: our spouse, our parents, our children, our friends, those whom we encounter in our everyday lives, and all who help us grow. And finally, we bring to mind God’s ever-provident love that continues to surprise and delight and invite us. Everything is a gift from our loving God. But we do not simply acknowledge these gifts; we savor them and relish them and offer God a prayer of thanks.

2. **Petition:** We ask God for the grace to help us see and understand and appreciate the people, places and events of our day in which God has revealed his love and beauty and goodness and kindness to us. We ask God to help us understand how we have responded to his love: to help us to see and feel and understand our actions today – the decisions we have made and the values we hold – as God sees and feels and understands them, and as God would wish us to see and feel and understand them. We ask God to help us to recognize those moments in which we found joy and peace and kindness and goodness and understanding, or in which we found – or promoted – the opposite of these. “Lord, what is it that you wish to show me today?”
3. **Review:** We walk with God back through our day, being attentive to all the ways in which God has revealed himself to us. We reflect on the places we have been, the people we encountered, the things we did or didn’t do, the things we could have done or should have done. Where did we extend love, and where did we withhold it? Yet we are attentive, not only to what we have or not done, but more importantly, to all that we sensed within ourselves. It is here in the depths of our affectivity that God moves us and deals with us most intimately. Where did we experience joy, peace, hope, anxiety, sadness, and fear? Where was God in this, and toward what did God seem to be urging us? How did we respond?
4. **Forgiveness:** We ask for the grace of God’s healing touch who, in his great love for us, removes our heart’s burdens. This is the loving embrace, the welcoming kiss, the joyful celebration, and the out-pouring of new life that we call forgiveness. This is the profound experience of knowing that we are loved and held by God in all our brokenness and littleness.
5. **Renewal:** We look toward tomorrow and, with God, we plan concretely how we will live it in accord with God’s loving desire for us. Until this moment we have been looking back in our prayer, but now we look ahead, with God, to the day to come.

**Conclusion:** We now speak to God as a friend, as one who loves and accepts us. We bring to God our brokenness, our littleness, our needs, our hopes, our dreams. We thank God for his grace and enlightening presence. Finally, we allow God to embrace us with his unbounded love.