THE GENERAL EXAMEN
Different Ways to Practise the Examen

Short Form

This can be practised at any time during the day but is especially suitable as a final thought in bed before falling asleep. It takes hardly any time so it can be done several times in one day. Although it is a short form, it incorporates the principles of the examen into a regular, instinctive habit of self-awareness.

Of the things that I have done today:

- Which do I now feel most happy about? I will thank God for these times.
- Which do I now feel most discomfort about? I will ask for God's help to cope better with such situations in the future, and, where fitting, I will say that I am sorry.

Long Form

This is a rephrasing and expansion of Ignatius' general examen that appears (with acknowledgement to J. Roger Greenwood) in John A. Veltri's Orientations Vol 1 (Loyola House, Guelph, Canada, 1979). It is called the 'examen of consciousness'. 'Conscience' and 'consciousness' are represented by the same word in Latin, and many people find this title more suitable and accurate. The examen follows Ignatius' five points:

- Give thanks.
- Ask for grace.
- Recall.
- Ask pardon.
- Resolve to amend.

This exercise takes about a quarter of an hour. It is a good form of prayer to use in the evening, when it is natural for us to remember our day and look ahead to the next morning.

1. **THANKSGIVING**
   Begin by looking over the day and asking to see where you need to be thankful. Do not choose what you think you should be thankful for; rather, by merely looking over the day, see what emerges, what you notice, even slightly. How do you feel towards what is shown to you? Do you see the giftedness of your life? Do you sense your own poverty? Allow gratitude to take hold of you and express this to the Father, Son and Spirit.

2. **ASK FOR LIGHT**
   This is a prayer for enlightenment from God, not from your own analysis of the day. Therefore ask the Holy Spirit to show you what he wants you to see.

3. **FINDING GOD IN ALL THINGS**
   Again look over the events of the day. This time ask the Lord to show you where he has been present in your life, either in you or in others, and what he has been asking of you. Look over your interior moods, feelings, urges, and movements, and see what stands out even slightly. Look for such things as joy, pain, turmoil, increase of love, anger, harmony, anxiety, freedom, enchainment, presence of God, isolation. In what general direction do you think you are being drawn by the Lord? How have you been responding to these experiences or situations that draw you towards the Lord and invite you to be more like him?

   More particularly, what attitudes are manifest in these experiences? Remember that your experience helps you to discover the underlying attitude, and your actions and choices flow from these attitudes. Is there any one place in your heart or any one area you are being asked to focus your attention on, to pray more seriously over, to take action on? This is where your energy needs to focus on instead of on the many other things you think are important.

4. **THE GIFTS OF SORROW, FORGIVENESS, AND GRATITUDE**
   Seek forgiveness from the Lord for the moments you did not respond to his love. Do not be afraid to ask for the gift of an ever-deepening sorrow for not co-operating with him who loves you. Praise the Lord for those moments you have been co-operating with him.

5. **HELP AND GUIDANCE FOR TOMORROW**
   Ask the Father for your needs for tomorrow. For example, you may need to pray to overcome something – or to accept your 'thorn in the flesh' – to persevere – to be more sensitive to the Lord's activity in your life – to let go – to love more – to have a conversion in some area – etc. There is nothing that can be done without God's loving assistance and guidance, so ask, look for, trust and co-operate with the Father, Son and Spirit living within you.

Examen of a Whole Life

Here is an example of how one could make an examen of one's entire life. It is best made with pen and paper to hand. The basic principles of the examen can be applied to any period of time – the preceding hour (as in the review of prayer), day, term, year… the time one has lived in the same place or done the same job… or one's entire life up till now.

- I begin from the desire to see my life as part of salvation history. As well as the external human history, there is another dimension – the story of God's work in me. On the one hand are the opportunities God has provided; on the other are my half-hearted responses. So I begin with thanking God for bringing me to where I now am.

- I want this examination to be as honest as possible. So I ask God for knowledge of the truth, including knowledge of my sins.

- This third point is the main part of the exercise. I make a note of the most important steps in my growing relationship with God (about eight is a good number). These steps, or stepping-stones, may be single events, or they may be periods of growth. They may be explicitly religious, or they may be connected to the human process of maturing that I did not think of in terms of God at the time. I make a brief note of each as it occurs to me. Afterwards I can order them chronologically, so I have an idea of the overall shape of my life. There may also be steps backward, or perhaps sideways. When I have done this I am in a position to see what in my life I want to thank God for. I take time over this, being grateful for all that now seems positive in my history. Only after I have done that do I look at the ways in which I have fallen short. Remembering the events that I am now grateful for, how could I have given more room in my life for the things that really matter?

- I express my sorrow for the ways in which I have sinned and the areas of my life in which there is still an element of sin.

- What priorities would I like to reaffirm for the future? Are there any practical steps I can take that would help redirect my life on better lines?

- I may close the exercise with the Lord's Prayer, which puts my request for forgiveness in the context of God's will for the world.

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