



Advent Examen

I. What do you say?

Ruth Holgate

St Ignatius of Loyola, in his *Spiritual Exercises*, encouraged a form of prayerful reflection on our experiences and feelings, known as the Examen, as a way of discovering how God is at work in our lives. *Thinking Faith* invites you to let this Ignatian way of praying guide you in this season of preparation, as we undertake an Advent Examen. Ruth Holgate helps us to take the first step of the Examen, 'Thanksgiving'. Why is it important for us to say 'thank you' to God?

Read the guide to the Examen on which the format of our Advent Examen is based:

www.thinkingfaith.org/sites/default/files/examen.pdf

'What do you say?' is the gentle prompt from countless parents of small children receiving a gift. Recently I heard it from the mother of my twin godsons as they happily applied themselves to the chocolate I had given them. I already knew they appreciated the gift, their pleasure was evident in their enthusiasm to unwrap and consume. Even so, the chorus of 'thank you' was good to hear. So we try to teach our children to be polite, but is that all we are doing when we encourage them to express their gratitude? Is there something about acknowledging a gift that in itself enriches the experience for both giver and receiver?

The Examen of Conscience begins with the instruction to give thanks for at least one thing from the past day. This first point gives our prayer a context of thanksgiving for the gifts we receive from God ... and I don't think this is just about being polite with God! Rather, we are deciding to look back on the day from a particular perspective, one of gratitude, of recognising that God is active in our lives and that God is generous in giving gifts. One of the reasons this is a good place to start our looking back is that in sifting through our day it is often easier to recall the challenges, difficulties, failings and hurts, as these

Photo by Matt Jones via Unsplash



tend to be more noisy in our memory. The difficult experience of the day can demand our attention, holding us in its disquiet. When we consciously try to tune into the gifts of the day we let ourselves pay attention to the quieter, gentler, hopeful moments and experiences. This in itself is a beginning to '[discern spirits](#)', to try consciously to recognise the action or touch of the Holy Spirit in our lives and also to identify what can stand in the

way of receiving or recognising that touch.

It is worth wondering what we might include as 'gifts' in our lives. I remember as a child one of the nuns at my convent school constantly encouraging us to count our blessings. The fact that she usually did this when we were feeling least grateful – extra homework being given, a wet day in the playground, a sense of something unfair happening to us – meant we did not really see what she was getting at, and I do not remember her offering any explanation. How we recognise gifts is in part about how something makes us feel or think. St Ignatius gave a clue as to how we identify what might be coming from God: anything that 'increases faith, hope or love'. We can also consider all those things that we experience as truly life-giving or life-enhancing. For example, a person

may be grateful for a beautiful sunset and the possibility of being able to appreciate it. We can also look more widely at things we generally take for granted: you are reading this article, perhaps at times it would be good to give thanks that you are able to read, or for those who taught you, or even for this online form of communication, which has so much potential for good – as well as bad! Then there are the more fundamental gifts, of life, creation, relationships, community, etc., for which even on the worst of days we might be able to give thanks. It is almost certainly the case that we will not always feel thankful for all of these at any given time, but it is likely that if we take a moment we will find something, particularly if we get into a habit of stopping and noticing. And it turns out that Sister Anne was right: when we are struggling, feeling hard done by or just having a really bad day, taking the time to look for one thing for which we are grateful can have a disproportionately positive effect on our perspective, reminding us that God is with us, actively working in the world and labouring to draw all people into building the Kingdom.

This practice of noticing and giving thanks expresses a stance of gratitude that permeates Ignatian Spirituality and is most beautifully summed up in the beginning of the Contemplation on Love at the end of the Spiritual Exercises:

I ask for an interior knowledge of all the great gifts that I have received, in order that, moved to profound gratitude, I may become able to love and to serve God in all things.

Here, gratitude is seen as an experience that has the power not just to shift perspective, but also to move a person to action. In recognising that they have received so much from God, all a person can do is respond in love and service. This is not to be considered as simply a reciprocal arrangement – ‘you did this for me so I will do something for you’; instead, in a profound way, the gratitude itself energises the desire and the response. Placed at the end of the Exercises, it is perhaps easy to imagine that after 30 days of meditation and contemplation there will be many fruits from prayer for which to be grateful, and this is generally the case. But we do not need to make a 30-day retreat in order to develop a grateful heart, we can usually pause and find something to be grateful for at any moment. Practising this in the Examen can help to tune us in to God’s life-giving activity in our lives and in the world around us, and so energise our lives towards greater love and service of God.

Giving thanks to God, then, is not simply about being polite, but rather acknowledging just how much we have been given. In expressing our gratitude, in hearing ourselves say ‘thank you’, we can gain both a new perspective *and* an impetus to respond in love and service. We are in a relationship with this God, the giver of gifts who is always more generous than we can imagine, so we might also consider what it is like for God to hear our ‘thank you’. We cannot get into the mind of God, but we do know what it is like for us to have a gift acknowledged – can we extend that somewhat and perhaps imagine that in some way God appreciates our ‘thank you’?

Ruth Holgate works with the Jesuits in Britain in spirituality and young adult ministry.