



## Advent Examen

# The grace to know myself

Dushan Croos SJ

The second stage of our Advent Examen is 'Prayer for the Light', in which we ask to be able to see what is truly important in our own lives, say Dushan Croos SJ. That prayer can have a particular feel to it in a season that asks us to look backward and forwards. 'The light for which we wait in Advent illuminates not only the past of the chosen people with their Saving Lord, but also illuminates the new way by which he is about to offer salvation to all women and men as well as to all of creation.'

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

[www.thinkingfaith.org/sites/default/files/examen.pdf](http://www.thinkingfaith.org/sites/default/files/examen.pdf)

As the sun sets on the shortest day of the year, four days before the celebration of the birth of Christ, the Church prays the Canticle of Mary [asking for light](#) at the darkest moment of the year:

O Rising Sun, you are the splendour of eternal light and the sun of justice.

O come and enlighten those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

[Divine Office, 21 Dec,  
Magnificat Antiphon]

The words are perhaps more familiar to us in the words of the great Advent hymn, 'O Come, O Come, Emmanuel':

O come, Thou Day-Spring, Come and cheer  
Our spirits by Thine advent here  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadows put to flight  
*Rejoice, rejoice, Emmanuel shall come to thee, o Israel*

Christ, the Sun Rising over the Earth, is the love that illuminates what it is for us to be human. St Ignatius invites us to seek that experience in the second point of the Examen: 'to ask grace to know my sins and rid

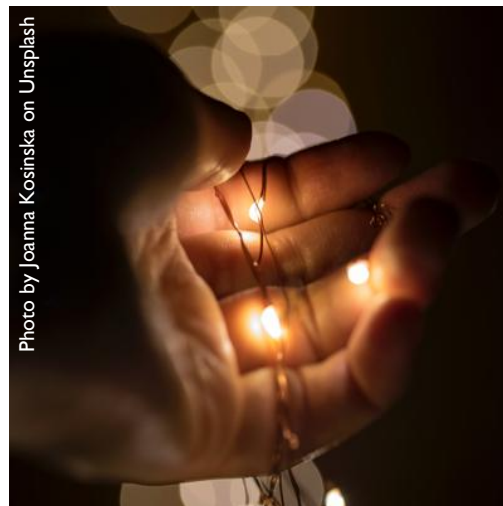


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myself of them.' [*Spiritual Exercises*, §43]. We need the light of the Holy Spirit to help us know our sins, but even more importantly so that we might notice where Christ is present in our life each day. We look backwards to notice God's trace in each day, in order to look forward to the future and be more ready to receive him as we meet him. Advent is the season in which we look back at the history of how the chosen people have heard the Lord through his prophets, so

that we can prepare to celebrate his coming among us in human flesh, and then to look forward in hope to his second coming at the end of time.

Asking for the grace of light on our life is the second point of the Examen; it is similar to asking for the grace we seek, which St Ignatius invites us to do each time we enter into prayer. To notice how the Lord is calling us at each moment of our lives, or how we are resisting or ignoring that call, requires the spotlight of the Holy Spirit, the Rising Sun who brings daylight over the world of our lives. This light is what we need in every delicate or important task: a well-directed light of the right brightness shows us what we are

doing, so that we can judge the task at hand. If the light shines in our eyes, or highlights what is a distraction, we are unable to focus the necessary attention on the work we need to do. In examining our own lives, if the Lord does not show us what is truly important, we might easily zoom in on what most bothers us, what obsesses us regularly, or on what we are told is central by those who pretend to be experts, but in reality understand little of how God works in our lives. In the gospels, the Sadducees, Scribes and Pharisees provide us with many examples of that.

Each day's news makes us well aware that neither the loudest nor the most elegant voice necessarily gives us the truth. It might be the uncomfortable voice, telling us that what we seek is unrealistic or impossible, that shows us the truth, as did the Hebrew prophets like Jeremiah; or perhaps the gentlest voice in the room, which says what others have missed, shows the best way forward. Perhaps as we become daily more aware of our lives, the Lord invites us to notice something other than our usual concerns, to look at parts of our lives that we usually ignore. Advent prepares us to celebrate the birth of a child, who in the eyes of the world has [undistinguished ancestry](#), in an obscure village, in a poor corner of the known world; yet the birth that passed unnoticed by the powers of the world is still more significant than that of any emperor's before or since. It might help to ask: what is the neglected but important moment of the day that the Holy Spirit illuminates for you? What opportunity does it offer to cleanse or purify your life, as the prophet Malachi invites us to do when he promises that 'the sun of righteousness will shine out with healing in its rays'?

The pathway through the prophets that Advent offers us is also an examen of the history of how God has accompanied his people through their history, though, at the time, they did not always recognise it. Though they resisted his call to holiness in favour of more popular types of god, which turned out to be hollow, he was walking with them through it all.

Light shines forward and backward. The light for which we wait in Advent illuminates not only the past of the chosen people with their Saving Lord, but also illuminates the new way by which he is about to offer salvation to all women and men as well as to all of creation. Likewise, the Rising Sun illuminates not only what we *have* done for good or ill, that we may not have noticed; but also enlightens how we *might* speak and act in the future in response to his call, or how we can avoid rejecting it, perhaps accidentally or unknowingly. By asking the light of the Holy Spirit on our past, we also ask the Lord to help us change our future to avoid what destroys us or others, and to help us go further and deeper in the good we desire to do. In this way we ask him to illuminate our choices, to breathe through them so that we make music to the glory of his name.

Our Advent route shows us the choices of [Zechariah](#), [Elizabeth and John](#), as well as the freely made choice of the young Mary of Nazareth, which transforms her into the one we know as the Blessed Virgin Mary, the first disciple, the Mother of the Church and of all believers. They made these choices because they had already hoped for the light that would dawn as a result of how they chose in hope. The Examen helps us also to choose in hope by the grace of the Rising Sun on our lives.

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