



# New year, new you?

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17 January is known as Ditch Your New Year's Resolution Day. How well have you kept any resolutions that you made – are you still resolved, or are you resigned to defeat? Mike Schramm takes an Ignatian approach to building change into our lives by suggesting that two well known prayers hold the key to success.

It is a near-universal phenomenon that those who celebrate a new year, or any new beginning, with a certain resolve will struggle to maintain this for long. Discipline is hard. This reality is as *auld* as *lang syne*. Recognising this human phenomenon should point us to the Christian's recognition of the need for grace to build upon this part of our nature. Here we can look to the wisdom of St Ignatius Loyola.



Many who are familiar with the Society of Jesus will already know that Ignatius was no slouch when it came to discipline, and he channelled this into a rigorous spiritual itinerary. It is no accident that his most famous work is the Spiritual Exercises and the Jesuits became known colloquially as 'God's soldiers'. If there was a saint and a religious order for maintaining a new year's resolution, it would be this Ignatius and his 'company'.

The most common advice given when it comes to resolutions and life changes is to make them measurable and specific, and one must be attentive to them daily. 'Lose weight' is not a resolution in the same way that 'exercise for thirty minutes, four days a week' is. When it comes to daily, specific and measurable goals, Ignatius and the Jesuits are there to help us again in the form of two of their most well-known prayers: the *Suscipe* and the Examen.

First, consider the text of the *Suscipe*:

Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace, that is enough for me. Amen.

The title of the prayer comes from the Latin word for 'receive', because this is the primary call throughout the prayer itself. It is a giving over of oneself to God completely, as Ignatius did. Notice, though, that it is not simply a 'I give myself over to you' sentiment, but Ignatius is specific, citing that his 'liberty', 'memory', 'understanding' and 'will' are what he gives over.

One could, as an extension of this prayer, write out even more specific examples of one's 'liberty' that can be given over to God. What decisions are you struggling to place before God? Are you pushing God to the side and saying 'I'll handle it' to him?

Similarly, which of your memories are you hanging onto that are holding you back from deeper commitment to let God lead you or let you love others? This is not about making things 'your fault' and no one is arguing that everything will change overnight. That is why the *Suscipe* is often prayed in the morning, every morning. Not only can you keep track of the specifics of this resolution by writing things down, but you can easily measure if you have prayed this prayer every day.

Many people treat a new year as a kind of secular Lent, where their resolution might resemble some new spiritual practice a Christian decides to take on to 'get the most out of this time'. While there is a place for doing something for either our physical or spiritual health – after all, 'faith without works is dead' (James 2:26) – so much of the [Christian life](#) must begin with a giving up and giving over to God first so that he can give back to us a 'hundredfold' (Mark 10:30). Again, one need not look any further than Ignatius, who had to give up his original dreams and plans of knighthood and glory when his leg was shattered. It was in giving these over every single day that he was able to allow God to use him.

Another common practice [associated with the Jesuits is the Examen](#), which is worded slightly differently depending on where you look, but follows these five basic steps:

1. Place yourself in God's presence. Give thanks for God's great love for you.
2. Pray for the grace to understand how God is acting in your life.
3. Review your day — recall specific moments and your feelings at the time.
4. Reflect on what you did, said, or thought in those instances. Were you drawing closer to God, or further away?
5. Look towards tomorrow — think of how you might collaborate more effectively with God's plan. Be specific, and conclude with the 'Our Father'.

In the same spirit of daily attentiveness to one's resolution, one cannot get more attentive or mindful than the nightly Examen. Notice, too, how its steps cover the four basic types of prayer: adoration, contrition, thanksgiving and supplication. One is not only reflecting on themselves when they pray the Examen, they are receiving inward God's inspiration and guidance, while moving outward to serve God and others better.

By placing oneself in God's presence, we are recognising our relationship with God as God, which is a type of adoration. The next line, 'give thanks', is obvious in the type of prayer it espouses, but it is the natural consequence of us truly being in God's presence, as our adoration could produce nothing but gratitude first. Then, in supplication, we ask for the 'grace to understand'. Next, contrition, which will likely occur as we 'review' the day and 'reflect' on everything we 'did, said, or thought', though this is not meant to be entirely negative, but as any failed resolution-maker has learned, we are not perfect.

The danger in self-reflection is that it can become too much about the 'self'. Fortunately, by looking 'towards tomorrow', we leave the past where it belongs because God's mercies 'are new every morning' (Lamentations 3:23). Again, the text of this version of the Examen even says: 'Be specific'. That is not only how this process works, it is how it *actually* works.

The *Suscipe* and Examen are prayers, and 'pray more' is probably a very common, but not measurable, resolution, which requires its own discipline. Because these prayers are simple, short and built-in to the daily experiences of life and seek to incorporate them in turn, they are not burdensome or abstract goals that are easily dismissed by the second week of the new year.

Another charism of the Society of Jesus is detachment from the things of this world so that they do not become a hindrance to one's relationship with God. This detachment is much easier said than done and must be practised daily. Fortunately, St Ignatius does not simply give us goals which we must struggle by our own will to achieve, but gives us steps as a means of cooperating with God's grace to realise them.

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