

The Great Annual Examen

And Exercise to Look Back; Look Within and Look Forward

by Stephen W. Smith

Ignatius' Daily Examen, developed 400 years ago, is a genius, and challenging, method where one takes time to think and pray through the past twenty-four hours. It is a process that raises awareness in our own hearts of how God moved. I made a commitment to practice the Daily Examen for one hour a day, every day, in 2017. It's been revolutionary, but I wanted something more as a way of thinking and praying through the past twelve months. Reviewing the past twelve months would give us a sort of GPS—a way to really see where we are right now on life's journey, and by God's grace and help, to get to where we want to go!

We all have our pro's and con's when it comes to New Year Resolutions, and I wanted to see if I might develop what I want to call "The Great Annual Examen". It's a simple question and reflect exercise. You will work through questions that help reflect on the past year and anticipate the coming year. It's called the "Examen" because in this exercise we take an examination of how we've "done" in life—on the journey and in different aspects. In some ways, many of us will admit that this past year has "undone" us. We've felt spent, done, or merely surviving, and, perhaps, barely surviving at that! However you reflect upon this past year, it's my hope that you'll have a GPS—a marker that will help you discern where you are, how you are, and where you want to go this next year.

"The Great Annual Examen" guides us in evaluating our lives through five major categories: physical, emotional, relational, vocational, and spiritual health. I've done this for you below and have given you a final category of your spiritual life to help you reflect more focused on you and God. I have also added two works from Thomas Merton and John O'Donohue that will conclude your reflection.

Sit with each category and work through the questions slowly. This is not an exercise where the "first response is the right response", slow is the key. In fact, thinking deeply about each question, you will probably find that a longer look, and lingering in reflection, will allow issues and concerns to rise that a quick response will simply negate.

Take a few days to do this rather than one sitting. Perhaps take the days between Christmas and the New Year to process this reflection. By looking back and gaining insight, we will not be so apt as to repeat the mistakes we made this past year. These first ten questions will help prime the pump for mindful reflection of your past year.

Section 1: General Examination of My Life

1. What are the most important events that have happened to me, or in me, this past year?
2. What are the greatest breakthroughs in any category of my life this past year (physically, emotionally, relationally, vocationally, spiritually, with other people, etc.)?
3. What has been the greatest struggle in my life this past year?
4. What has been the greatest, and deepest, loss this past year?
5. What was the area that has consumed my thinking, attention, and focus this past year (health, relationship, future, etc.)?
6. Where have I felt most vulnerable in my life?
7. Where have I most experienced the presence of God this past year and why?
8. In the past twelve months, where have I experienced the greatest sense of consolation (peace, contentment, shalom, beauty, etc.)?
9. In the past twelve months, what area of my life has given me the most desolation (pre-occupation, depression, anxiety, etc.)?

10. What is ONE word that would begin to sum up this past year?

Section Two: Five Categories of My Life

1. ***My physical health:***

Five words that describe my physical condition and well being this past year.

a)

b)

c)

d)

e)

How many hours of sleep can I honestly say I get each night? (Eight hours are recommended).

What choices have I given attention to regarding my health these past twelve months?

What specific goals do I want to achieve these coming twelve months (better blood pressure, weight management, exercise, etc.)?

2. ***My Emotional Health***

What are five FEELINGS (positive or negative) that I believe have dominated my life this past year?

a)

b)

c)

d)

e)

When was I the HAPPIEST this past year? What was I doing, who was I with, where was I, and where was I physically?

When was I the SADDEST this past year? Who was I with and what was I doing?

What area of my life gives me the greatest sense of internal stress?

How do I feel about my emotional well being this past year?

3. ***My Vocational Health***

What are five words that best describe my job/vocation/career?

a)

b)

c)

d)

e)

This past year, have I lived to work or worked to live? (Circle one)

How do I feel about my vocational journey (check all that apply):

I want to make a change this next year.

I want to continue as I am, and just as I am.

I would like to use this next year to study and prepare for a vocational change.

I want to reassess and evaluate my vocational journey this next year.

I want to re-position myself in regards to my work this next year.

I believe I work _____ hours a week. Next year, I would like to work _____ hours a week. To do this, I will need to:

Is my job, right now, giving me a sense of contentment and satisfaction? Why or why not?

4. My Relational Health

List of people's names who have been life-giving to me this past year:

What letter grade do I give to my over-all sense of having community? A-Excellent, B-Very good, C-Average, or D-Really lacking in friends:

Is my life style, work schedule, and present reality conducive to having the relationships I both want and need? Explain more in a few sentences.

5. ***My Spiritual Health***

Five words that describe my spiritual health (distant, intimate, excellent, very poor, no time for God, etc.):

a)

b)

c)

d)

e)

How I do describe my prayer life this past year?

How do I feel about how I have worshipped this past year?

How I am feeling about my church experience?

What feels lacking to me in terms of my relationship with God?

How has my image of God changed or matured this past year?

What five words would I give to characterize my image of God?

- a)
- b)
- c)
- d)
- e)

How has my relationship with God been challenged?

The three most important spiritual take-a-ways from this past year that I never want to forget:

What was my deepest spiritual struggle, the place of the greatest wrestling with God or the place of my deepest lament?

What people do I feel the most spiritually connected to in my life?

Prayer of Gratitude:

End your time of The Annual Great Examen in a time of prayer. Express your heart in gratitude for specific things, events, people, and growth you've experienced or witnessed. Be specific in your thanksgiving. Consider doing a Prayer of Gratitude using an acrostic of G-R-A-T-I-T-U-D-E. With each letter of "gratitude", express thanks for something specific. Example: G- I am grateful for my sister G-loria.

Prayer for the Future Year:

Spend some moments asking for God's blessing on the future twelve months.

Consider praying the beautiful prayer of Thomas Merton:

My Lord God,
I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
nor do I really know myself,
and the fact that I think I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this you will lead me by the right road,
though I may know nothing about it.
Therefore will I trust you always though
I may seem to be lost and in the shadow of death.
I will not fear, for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me to face my perils alone.

Consider the blessing by the Irish Priest, John O'Donohue:

For Longing
by John O'Donohue

blessed be the longing that brought you here
and quickens your soul with wonder.

may you have the courage to listen to the voice of desire
that disturbs you when you have settled for something safe.

may you have the wisdom to enter generously into your own unease
to discover the new direction your longing wants you to take.

may the forms of your belonging – in love, creativity, and friendship –
be equal to the grandeur and the call of your soul.

may the one you long for long for you.
may your dreams gradually reveal the destination of your desire.

may a secret providence guide your thought and nurture your feeling.

may your mind inhabit your life with the sureness
with which your body inhabits the world.

may your heart never be haunted by ghost-structures of old damage.

may you come to accept your longing as divine urgency.
may you know the urgency with which God longs for you.

Developed by Stephen W. Smith, President and Spiritual Director of Potter's Inn (The Great Annual Examen is version 1:2, December 2017, All rights reserved and Copyrighted @2017