



THE GREAT ANNUAL EXAMEN

by Stephen W. Smith

*An Exercise to Look Back, Look Within, and
Look Forward*

Reflect back and pray forward!



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Ignatius' Daily Examen, developed 400 years ago, is a brilliant, challenging, innovative 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 in our lives in the past day. *The Great Annual Examen* is based on the Daily Examen, but it is expanded to help us think and pray through the past year or season of our lives. Reviewing the past twelve months gives us a sort of GPS, a way for the Soul 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! In some ways, many of us will admit that this past year has "undone" us. We've felt spent, done, or merely surviving. Perhaps barely surviving! However, as you reflect upon this past year, it's my hope that this tool will be a marker to help you discern where you are, how you are, and where you want to be.

This is not about resolutions. It is about revelations. This is about awakening to what God has been doing—what God has been up to in your life.

It's a simple question and reflection exercise. You will work through questions that help reflect on the past year in different categories or themes and anticipate the coming year. It's called the "Examen" because in this exercise we take an examination of the journey of the last year.

"The Great Annual Examen" guides us in evaluating our lives through five major categories: physical, emotional, relational, vocational, and spiritual health.

Sit with each category and work through the questions slowly. This is not an exercise where the "first response is the right response." Here 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.

You may want to take a few days to do this, as opposed to one long sitting. Consider taking the days between Christmas and the New Year to process this reflection. Or if you choose to do this in a group, or church, any time can be a good time to pause, look back, look in, and look up. By looking back and gaining insight, hopefully we will not be so quick 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.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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.)?

[illegible]

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?

PONDERINGS

[illegible]

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?

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.)?

This image shows a full page of white paper with horizontal blue or grey ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page, providing a template for handwriting practice. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the page.

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, 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?

[illegible]

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 (note 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 reposition 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?

[illegible]

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 overall sense of having community?

A-Excellent

B-Very good

C-Average, or

D-Really lacking in friends.

F-would be," I'm really failing in the friendship area of my life."

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

PONDERINGS

This image shows a single page from a notebook or ledger. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal blue lines across its entire width, providing a guide for handwriting. The margins are uniform on all sides, and there is no pre-printed text or other markings on the page.

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 do I 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?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

What five words would I use 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?

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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.

G _____

R _____

A _____

T _____

I _____

T _____

U _____

D _____

E _____

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

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.*

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 Revised 2021 for *30 Days with the Potter*)

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