

**Lenten Retreat in Daily Living 2010
Prayer Material for Week 2 of Retreat**

Grace: A deep sense of my sinfulness; an understanding of the core ways I don't allow God in, of my core brokenness. A sense of sorrow for my sinfulness.

Day 1: *A World of Beauty and Life Becomes a World of Darkness*

In your outer senses and imagination, look at, smell, touch, taste, listen to the pollution of the world – noise pollution, sight pollution, chemical and waste pollution that has affected our earth...the land, the ocean, the sky.

In your imagination (or in reality) do this exercise: “Stand at a busy street corner, and look into the faces of those passing by. The world is far from being filled with persons who love God, love others, and long for the Kingdom. Many feel empty, unhappy, and lost as they rush through life seeking mostly comforts, money, importance, to be loved or admired at any cost, power over others or just to have a good time.

Many become unfaithful in marriage, neglect God, disregard law and authority, cheat or steal, practice discrimination, drink too much, endlessly criticize but do precious little about it.

Even many good people live just for themselves and what they can get out of life – or get away with – forgetting: we are called to be lovers, stewards, and givers of life to others.

Some prefer sex or romance to love. Some escape tensions or boredom with drugs, erotic behavior, or violent entertainment. Many are unwilling to reach out to others, or commit themselves to anyone or anything.

And so we see: tensions and strife – racial, class, marriage, and personal; injustice and crimes, violence and wars, poverty and divorce, insecurity and discouragement, feelings of powerlessness and guilt, low self-esteem and insensitivity to the needs of others, and even to their most basic rights. Nature is damaged, “love” grows stale, and even life is held cheap.” (Richard Huelsman)

I am part of this dark world. I have been affected by the darkness and have contributed to it. What particular areas of darkness affect me? How have I contributed to the world's darkness, either by what I do or do not do? How do I feel as I ponder the darkness of the world.

Imagine Jesus our Lord present before you on the cross and being to speak with him, asking how it is that though he is the Creator, He has stooped to become human, and to pass from eternal life to death here in time, that thus He might die

for our sins. Listen to Him. Share with Him any thoughts or feelings that come to your mind, and listen again.

Day 2: *A Meditation on Our Sins* [attached]

Day 3: *Romans 7:18-25a*

"I can will what is right, but I cannot do it...Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Contemplate the words of Romans, considering this commentary on the section: "Perhaps more fundamental, is a contrast between a human being struggling with sin unaided by God and a human being turning to God and ultimately helped by him (through the Spirit) in the same contest."

Day 4: *John 5:1-9*

Contemplate the story of the man lying by the pool for year, and particularly Jesus' question to him: Do you want to be well?

Hear Jesus ask that question to you. What is your response?

Particularly focus on those things that make it difficult for you to embrace the healing Jesus offers.

Talk to Jesus about what is difficult for you.

Day 5: *Luke 7:36-50*

Contemplate the story of the woman washing the feet of Jesus with her tears and perfuming them with oil. Let your senses enter into your prayer, seeing the encounter between Jesus and her, smelling the perfume, listening to what Jesus says to her and to Simon.

Notice the tenderness in the woman and in Jesus in contrast to the hardness in Simon the Pharisee. Notice Jesus' total acceptance of her, even though she is considered a great sinner.

Ponder his words: "Her many sins are forgiven because of her great love. Little is forgiven the one whose love is small."

What does Jesus' acceptance of the woman say about Jesus' relationship with me? Speak with Jesus about what his acts and words mean to you.

Day 6: *Luke 15:11-24*

“How can God love me? I'm full of faults, and don't pray very much.” Such thoughts or feelings of guilt or unworthiness can be obstacles to God's desire for intimacy. The sooner we let God love us as we are, the better.

Contemplate the story of the Prodigal Son, letting your senses enter your prayer. Be with the son as he realizes the error of his ways and considers returning to his father. What does he feel as he proceeds toward home?

Notice the father as the son returns – his welcome and his love. Watch the encounter between the father and the son. Then let the father turn to you. Speak what you need to him and let him speak to you of his love and acceptance of you, with all your warts and moles and weaknesses.

Day 7: *Kingdom Exercise* [following page]

[Portions of these prayer materials were taken from Maureen Conroy, *Giving the Retreat in Everyday Life* and from Joseph Tetlow, *Choosing Christ in the World*]

A Meditation on Our Sins

1. I come into God's presence and offer myself to Him.

2. Then, I compose myself in my real world. I consider how I live surrounded by violence and anger, in a deteriorating environment steeped in self-deception, untruth, and error, and under genuine threat of nuclear holocaust. I consider that I have taken much of this disorder into myself, some of it before I had free choice.

3. And now I ask of God what I yearn for: To feel the sorrow of sin in my own life, more and more deeply. To have given me tears in my heart for my sins, and even tears in my eyes.

First, I remember my sins.

I go back to the places where I have lived and see what happened there. I recall the things I have done with others—work, friendships, projects, play. I think back to schooling and work places. When I recall an incident or an action, I carefully visit it in the presence of the Lord Jesus: what went on here? what's behind the words and gestures? what was my project then? what was in my heart?

Second, I weigh my sins.

I look steadily at the ugliness of my sins, how revolting these actions and words were. I see that my sins would be wretched things even were they not against God's commands or my own conscience.

Then I look steadily at myself. Who am I, who do these things? Am I the best and most important person around? Does my value outweigh the value of all the saints and angels—that I should insist on having my own way over against God's hopes? Sometimes I seem to be a canning factory whose every tin is steeped in salmonella; everything I touch is tinged with selfishness.

Third, I look steadily at my God.

He creates me constantly, giving me good to do, shaping in me needs and purposes that will lead to my holiness and happiness, raising good desires in me for His love and for great love of my fellows and of my own self. God is gentle and courteous. God is wise and supremely patient. God gives all gifts and even His Self. And what do I do but trash my holy needs and purposes and ignore and despise many good desires, to go chasing after pleasure and power. How am I like God?

Fourth, I look at all God's creation.

When I look at the beautiful order in the universe and in the consciousness of animals and birds, I am astounded that they did not turn on me, each in its own way, as a serious blotch on the beauty. While I refused to be my true self, gravity held me and the sun refused to burn me to a crisp. When I did hideous things, flowers offered me their fragrances nonetheless and birds still sang when I walked around. Even though I was deeply alienated from God, the laws He printed into earth and sea and air sustained me—air filled my lungs, food digested in my system, light entered my eyes. And I was totally out of sync! More than that: Why weren't holy people moved by the Spirit to end my evildoing, if not me myself? How could God's angels have kept protecting me, instead of cutting me down? Why didn't the earth swallow me up? Why wasn't I snatched off to the place where a lot of people just like me have gone?

Finally, I will turn to God my merciful Lord. I will say to God whatever occurs to me, pouring out my thoughts, and saying thanks that He has given me life through all this up to this moment. I determine to do none of this again, if God will help me. And I end with the Our Father. ❖

The Kingdom

1. After I have accepted God's loving gaze on me, I offer my whole self to Him.
2. Then I remember Jesus accepting God's loving gaze on Him, as He moved around His homeland. I let my imagination move me into the little towns He was in, the synagogues, the roads He walked.
3. Now I am ready to ask God for what I want: Here, I want to be the kind of person who will hear when Jesus Christ the King summons me, and not be shy or hang back, but quick and persevering in following His lead.

The First Part is a fantasy.

Imagine a grand nation with a tremendous people. See how they have been troubled and tested. For their nation's affairs have gotten badly botched. They feel tense and worried. Now imagine that they get a new leader. This leader sounds solid. A person who seems to have been handpicked by God for this people. The leader has unsurpassed charisma, is a physically beautiful person, shows tremendous political adroitness, makes people believe that good times are definitely on the way. Imagine that the people grow very, very content.

Then imagine for yourself the program that this fresh, excellent leader proposes for the people. With care and resoluteness, the nation's enemies can be overcome or won over. The economy needs careful overhauling—but it will be painful. Civil rights have eroded. Education stumbles along in disarray. Any program that could possibly succeed will require a lot of belt-tightening, and many groups will have to work through some very tough questions together.

Then, imagine that the leader gathers a special group. To this group, the leader gives a personal invitation. He gathers you and stands before you. Imagine that you sit right in front, listening. "I am going to inaugurate this program. I am going to see that it suc-

ceeds. Anyone who wants to work with me on it will have to put up with what I will put up with—extravagantly long hours, pitilessly hard work, going without not just luxuries but even without basic comforts, getting battered by public opinion and the media, and actually running the risk of being assassinated. But I can tell anyone who listens: This program will succeed and make millions of people's lives vastly better."

Change the fantasy and imagine that everyone has left. You sit alone. You wonder, What kind of person could reject such an invitation? What kind of person could accept it? Would I accept that invitation? Would I want to work with that kind of leader? Suppose I left that special group and walked away from the charismatic leader—what would I feel about myself later on? And you imagine accepting the invitation. What do you do? After a while, gently end the fantasy.

The Second Part uses the imagination but remains rooted in the real. I just apply my fantasy to Jesus Christ.

If a charismatic secular leader could demand loyalty (and many less excellent ones get unquestioning loyalty from their friends), what about Jesus Christ, whom God has made eternal King?

I let my fancy roam. I imagine Jesus surrounded by 72 disciples. They sit on a hill. Jesus talks with them, saying something like this: "It is my will to win over the whole of humankind. No enemy can defeat me or finally interfere with my Kingdom. I will draw all to myself. I will stay with my friends and we will labor and struggle, watch and pray. No one will have to go through anything that I do not myself go through. Whoever works with me and suffers with me will also share the glory of the Kingdom with me. I assure you, I will see my project crowned with total success." After feeling how wonderfully attractive Jesus' invitation is, gently end the fantasy.

The Kingdom (continued)

Then consider that anyone with any sense at all will follow Jesus Christ. Consider this: some might want to walk more closely with Jesus Christ in this enterprise, though they cannot explain their desiring. If you feel inclined to do so, formally say this prayer to Jesus Christ:

ETERNAL LORD OF ALL THINGS

I feel Your gaze on me.
I sense that Your Mother stands near, watching,
and that with You are all the great beings of heaven—
angels and powers and martyrs and saints.
Lord Jesus, I think You have put a desire in me.
If You will help me, please,
I would like to make my offering:
I want it to be my desire, and my choice,
provided that You want it, too,
to live my life as You lived Yours.
I know that You lived an insignificant person
in a little, despised town;
I know that You rarely tasted luxury and never, privilege,
and that You resolutely refused to accept power.
I know that You suffered rejection by leaders,
abandonment by friends, and failure.
I know. I can hardly bear the thought of it all.
But it seems a toweringly wonderful thing
that You might call me to follow You and stand with You.
I will labor with You to bring God's reign,
if You will give me the gift to do it. Amen. ❖

*what does it mean for me to
offer myself*

Rummaging for God: Praying Backward Through Your Day

By DENNIS HAMM

ABOUT 20 YEARS AGO, at breakfast and during the few hours that followed, I had a small revelation. This happened while I was living in a small community of five Jesuits, all graduate students in New Haven, Conn. I was alone in the kitchen, with my cereal and *The New York Times*, when another Jesuit came in and said: "I had the weirdest dream just before I woke up. It was a liturgical dream. The lector had just read the first reading and proceeded to announce, 'The responsorial refrain today is, *If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.*' Whereupon the entire congregation soberly repeated, '*If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.*'" We both thought this enormously funny. At first, I wasn't sure just *why* this was so humorous. After all, almost everyone would assent to the courageous truth of the maxim, "If at first . . ." It has to be a cross-cultural truism ("Keep on truckin'!"). Why, then, would these words sound so incongruous in a liturgy?

A little later in the day, I stumbled onto a clue. Another, similar phrase popped into my mind: "If today you hear his voice, harden not your hearts" (Ps. 95). It struck me that that sentence has exactly the same rhythm and the same syntax as: "If at first you don't succeed, try, try again." Both begin with an "if" clause and end in an imperative. Both have seven beats. Maybe that was one of the unconscious sources of the humor.

The try-try-again statement *sounds* like the harden-not-your-hearts refrain, yet what a contrast! The latter is clearly biblical, a paraphrase of a verse from a psalm, one frequently used as a responsorial refrain at the Eucharist. The former, you know

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instinctively, is probably not in the Bible, not even in Proverbs. It is true enough, as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. There is nothing of faith in it, no sense of God. The sentiment of the line from Psalm 95, however, expresses a conviction central to Hebrew and Christian faith, that we live a life in dialogue with God. The contrast between those two seven-beat lines has, ever since, been for me a paradigm illustrating that truth.

Yet how do we hear the voice of God? Our Christian tradition has at least four answers to that question. First, along with the faithful of most religions, we perceive the divine in what God has made, creation itself (that insight sits at the heart of Christian moral thinking). Second, we hear God's voice in the Scriptures, which we even *call* "the word of God." Third, we hear God in the authoritative teaching of the church, the living tradition of our believing community. Finally, we hear God by attending to our experience, and interpreting it in the light of all those other ways of hearing the divine voice—the structures of creation, the Bible, the living tradition of the community.

THE PHRASE, "If *today* you hear his voice," implies that the divine voice must somehow be accessible in our daily experience, for we are creatures who live one day at a time. If God wants to communicate with us, it has to happen in the course of a 24-hour day, for we live in no other time. And how do we go about this kind of listening? Long tradition has provided a helpful tool, which we call the examination of consciousness today. "Rummaging for God" is an expression that suggests going through a drawer full of stuff, feeling around, looking for something that you are sure must be in there somewhere. I think that image catches some of the feel of what is classically known in church language as the prayer of "examen."

The examen, or examination, of conscience is an ancient practice in the church. In fact, even before Christianity, the Pythagoreans and the Stoics promoted a version of the practice. It is what most of us Catholics were taught to do to prepare for confession. In that form, the examen was a matter of examining one's life in terms of the Ten Commandments to see how daily behavior stacked up against those divine criteria. St. Ignatius includes it as one of the exercises in his manual, *The Spiritual Exercises*.

It is still a salutary thing to do but wears thin as a lifelong, daily practice. It is hard to motivate yourself to keep searching your experience for how you sinned. In recent decades, spiritual writers have worked with the implication that *conscience* in Romance languages like French (*conscience*) and Spanish (*conciencia*) means more than our English word "conscience," in the sense of moral awareness and judgment; it also means "consciousness."

Now prayer that deals with the full contents of your *consciousness* lets you cast your net much more broadly than prayer that limits itself to the contents of conscience, or moral awareness. A number of people—most famously, George Aschenbrenner, S.J., in an article in *Review for Religious* (1971)—have developed this idea in profoundly practical ways. Recently, the Institute of Jesuit Sources in St. Louis, Mo., published a fascinating reflection by Joseph Tetlow, S.J., called *The Most Postmodern Prayer: American Jesuit Identity and the Examen of Conscience, 1920-1990*.

What I am proposing here is a way of doing the examen that works for me. It puts a special emphasis on feelings, for reasons that I hope will become apparent. First, I describe the format. Second, I invite you to spend a few minutes actually doing it. Third, I describe some of the consequences that I have discovered to flow from this kind of prayer.

A Method: Five Steps.

1. *Pray for light.* Since we are not simply daydreaming or reminiscing but rather looking for some sense of how the Spirit of God is leading us, it only makes sense to pray for some illumination. The goal is not simply memory but graced understanding. That's a gift from God devoutly to be begged. "Lord, help me understand this blooming, buzzing confusion."

2. *Review the day in thanksgiving.* Note how different this is from looking immediately for your sins. Nobody likes to poke around in the memory bank to uncover smallness, weakness, lack of generosity. But everybody likes to fondle beautiful gifts, and that is precisely what the past 24 hours contain—gifts of existence, work, relationships, food, challenges. Gratitude is the foundation of our whole relationship with God. So use whatever cues help you to walk through the day from the moment of awakening—even the dreams you recall upon awakening. Walk through the past 24 hours, from hour to hour, from place to place, task to task, person to person, thanking the Lord for every gift you encounter.

3. *Review the feelings that surface in the replay of the day.* Our feelings, positive and negative, the painful and the pleasing, are clear signals of where the action was during the day. Simply pay attention to any and all of those feelings as they surface, the whole range: delight, boredom, fear, anticipation, resentment, anger, peace, contentment, impatience, desire, hope, regret, shame, uncertainty, compassion, disgust, gratitude, pride, rage, doubt, confidence, admiration, shyness—whatever was there. Some of us may be hesitant to focus on feelings in this over-psychologized age, but I believe that these feelings are the liveliest index to what is happening in our lives. This leads us to the fourth moment:

4. *Choose one of those feelings (positive or negative) and pray from it.* That is, choose the remembered feeling that most caught your attention. The feeling is a sign that something important was going on. Now simply express spontaneously the prayer that surfaces as you attend to the source of the feeling—praise, petition, contrition, cry for help or healing, whatever.

5. *Look toward tomorrow.* Using your appointment calendar if that helps, face your immediate future. What feelings surface as you look at the tasks, meetings and appointments that face you? Fear? Delighted anticipation? Self-doubt? Temptation to procrastinate? Zestful plan-

ning? Regret? Weakness? Whatever it is, turn it into prayer—for help, for healing, whatever comes spontaneously. To round off the examen, say the Lord's Prayer.

A mnemonic for recalling the five points: LT3F (light, thanks, feelings, focus, future).

Do It.

Take a few minutes to pray through the past 24 hours, and toward the next 24 hours, with that five-point format.

Consequences.

Here some of the consequences flowing from this kind of prayer:

1. There is always something to pray about. For a person who does this kind of prayer at least once a day, there is never the question: What should I talk to God about? Until you die, you always have a past 24 hours, and you always have some feelings about what's next.

2. The gratitude moment is worthwhile in itself. "Dedicate yourselves to gratitude," Paul tells the Colossians. Even if we drift off into slumber after reviewing the gifts of the day, we have praised the Lord.

3. We learn to face the Lord where we are, as we are. There is no other way to be present to God, of course, but we often fool ourselves into thinking that we have to "put on our best face" before we address our God.

4. We learn to respect our feelings. Feelings count. They are morally neutral until we make some choice about acting upon or dealing with them. But if we don't attend to them, we miss what they have to tell us about the quality of our lives.

5. Praying from feelings, we are liberated from them. An unattended emotion can dominate and manipulate us. Attending to and praying from and about the persons and situations that give rise to the emotions helps us to cease being unwitting slaves of our emotions.

6. We actually find something to bring to confession. That is, we stumble across our sins without making them the primary focus.

7. We can experience an inner healing. People have found that praying about (as opposed to fretting about or denying) feelings leads to a healing of mental life. We probably get a head start on our dream-work when we do this.

8. This kind of prayer helps us get over our Deism. Deism is belief in a sort of "clock-maker" God, a God who does

indeed exist but does not have much, if anything, to do with his people's ongoing life. The God we have come to know through our Jewish and Christian experience is more present than we usually think.

9. Praying this way is an antidote to the spiritual disease of Pelagianism. Pelagianism was the heresy that approached life with God as a do-it-yourself project ("If at first you don't succeed..."), whereas a true theology of grace and freedom sees life as response to God's love ("If today you hear God's voice...").

A final thought. How can anyone dare to say that paying attention to felt experience is a listening to the voice of God? On the face of it, it does sound like a dangerous presumption. But, notice, I am not equating memory with the voice of God. I am saying that, if we are to listen for the God who creates and sustains us, we need to take seriously and prayerfully the meeting between the creatures we are and all else that God holds lovingly in existence. That "inter-face" is the felt experience of my day. It deserves prayerful attention. It is a big part of how we know and respond to God. ■



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The Examen of Conscience

I examine my conscience by looking first of all at what I have done and what I am doing. For just as love is acted out and not merely talked about, so too are virtue and sin.

In general, I examine my conscience by simply looking back over my day to see what I have done and failed to do. Did I act as I have wanted to act? Am I developing ways of acting that I really approve of, or perhaps falling into ways of acting that my own conscience rejects?

Sometimes, I might concentrate on one particular thing I am doing or failing to do. For instance: I want to develop the habit of checking my calendar before accepting any invitation, and I know it will take me a certain time to develop that habit. Or perhaps I have become aware that I am using the name of Jesus Christ as an expletive, and I intend to stop that. In such cases, many find the Examen of Conscience useful as a means.

The Examen of Conscience helps me to check how I have acted during the day—not what its significance is, or how I felt about it, but what I have done or failed to do.

Here is a proven way to go about it:

- First, I thank God our Lord for all He does in and for me and all humankind.

- Second, I ask God to enlighten my mind to see my sins, and to help me live without them.

- Third, I ask myself what I have done. What have I said, or left unsaid? What have I done, or left undone? I examine my day, perhaps with a little system—by time periods, or places, or some such method.

- Fourth, I will identify anything that I do not approve of according to my own conscience, and turn to God asking forgiveness.

- Fifth, I will look forward and decide how I will act tomorrow, provided God gives me that gift. And I end with the Our Father.

This exercise can be well done in just a few minutes, perhaps sometimes only one or two.

It is genuinely important that those who intend to mature in Christ spend some time at the end of each day thanking God for the day and examining how they are acting out their hopes and intentions. ❖