

# Waking Up to the Water

## THE POWER OF ST. IGNATIUS' EXAMEN PRAYER

Two young fish were swimming along in the ocean one day when they encountered an older fish, who said to them, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” The two young fish swam on, and eventually one of them turned to the other and asked, “What the heck is water?”

The point of this story? The most important realities are often the ones that are the hardest for us to see and talk about. For Christians, that means that we can “swim” through life without recognizing the presence of God—and live an unexamined life. But as Socrates once famously said, “The unexamined life is not worth living.”

Fortunately, the sixteenth-century Spanish saint Ignatius of Loyola offered us *a tool for seeing the water*, that is, God’s presence in our everyday lives. This method of prayer has been used by countless Christians over the past five hundred years to help them live the examined life, and it can help you as well.

In the articles in this issue, I want to guide you through two Ignatian prayers: the Examen and the Suscipe. Although these are two separate prayers, they really comprise one method because they are both part of a single way of praying. I want to unpack these prayers through the lens of the life of Ignatius. That’s

Articles in this issue are written by Fr. Nathan O’Halloran, SJ. Fr. Nathan is assistant professor of religious studies and director of the Catholic Studies Program at Loyola University New Orleans as well as a theological advisor for *The Word Among Us*.

because I've found that using his life as an example can be a particularly fruitful way of seeing the positive, concrete effects that these prayers can have in a person's life.

**The General Examen.** Let's begin with the *General Examen*. A simple and straightforward examination of conscience, it consists of five steps: (1) I give thanks for favors received; (2) I ask for the grace to know my sins; (3) I examine my thoughts, words, and deeds from my rising to the present; (4) I ask for pardon; and (5) I resolve to amend with God's grace and close with an Our Father.

And that's it. But the simplicity of this tool belies its power. For St. Ignatius, the Examen was a way to wake up and live a life conscious of the presence of God. Writing to younger members of the religious order he founded—the Jesuits—Ignatius said they should especially

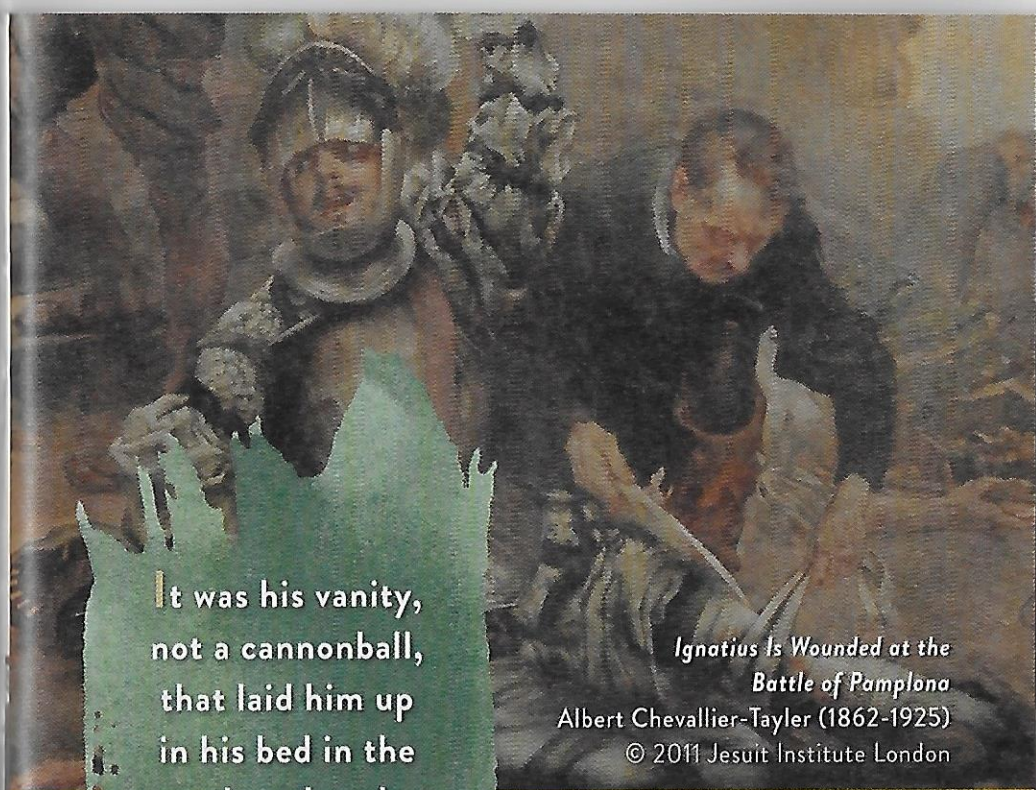
practice seeking the presence of our Lord in all things: in their dealings with other people, their walking, seeing, tasting, hearing, understanding, and all our activities. For his Divine Majesty truly is in everything by his presence,

power, and essence. This kind of meditation—finding God our Lord in everything—is easier than lifting ourselves up and laboriously making ourselves present to more abstracted divine realities.

The Examen teaches this practice of “seeking the presence of our Lord in all things.” That is why one of Ignatius' greatest disciples, St. Francis Xavier, taught his fellow Jesuit missionaries to “take care never to fail to make it [the Examen] twice a day, or at least once, according to our common method, whatever business you have upon your hands.” Not even a missionary as busy as Francis Xavier could omit the Examen! After all, what could be more fruitful for a missionary than to take a moment in his day to identify the presence of God and the movement of his Spirit in order to better follow his lead?

Before we take a closer look at the Examen, let's take a look at Ignatius' life to see how he himself slowly woke up to the “water” of God's presence.

**Attention-Seeking Vanity.** Iñigo (St. Ignatius' baptismal name) tells us at the beginning of



It was his vanity,  
not a cannonball,  
that laid him up  
in his bed in the  
castle at Loyola.

*Ignatius Is Wounded at the  
Battle of Pamplona*

Albert Chevallier-Taylor (1862-1925)

© 2011 Jesuit Institute London

his autobiography that until his twenty-sixth year, he was a “man given over to the vanities of the world.” He went after these vanities with relentless pursuit, a man driven to receive praise and affirmation. His mother, Doña Marina, died when he was very young, and his father, Beltrán de Oñaz, passed away when he was about sixteen. Ignatius was five feet two, a runt among Spanish Basques, but also quite proud of his long blondish hair and shapely legs. He was also the youngest of thirteen brothers

and sisters. Perhaps it was the loss of both parents early in life, coupled with having so many siblings to compete with, that made him so driven to seek attention.

In fact, it was this very attention seeking that caused him foolishly to convince his fellow soldiers to attempt to defend the fortress of Pamplona during an uprising in 1521. Everyone else saw “clearly”—in St. Ignatius' own words—that it could not be defended. But his honor was at stake—which translated in this case to his vanity.

In the battle, Ignatius was struck in the leg by a cannonball. But it

was his vanity—not a cannonball—that laid him up in his bed in the castle at Loyola. Lying there, he may have recalled the words of his aunt, Sr. Doña Marina de Guevara, who once told him, “Iñigo, you will not learn nor become wise until someone breaks your leg.” But even that was not enough. The doctors set his leg, and it healed, but an “unsightly” bone protuberance remained visible through his tights. This Iñigo could not bear. And so, a martyr to his vanity, he underwent the “butchery” of having the bone sawed off—without the benefit of anesthesia! It was this second surgery that turned his bed of convalescence into a bed of conversion.

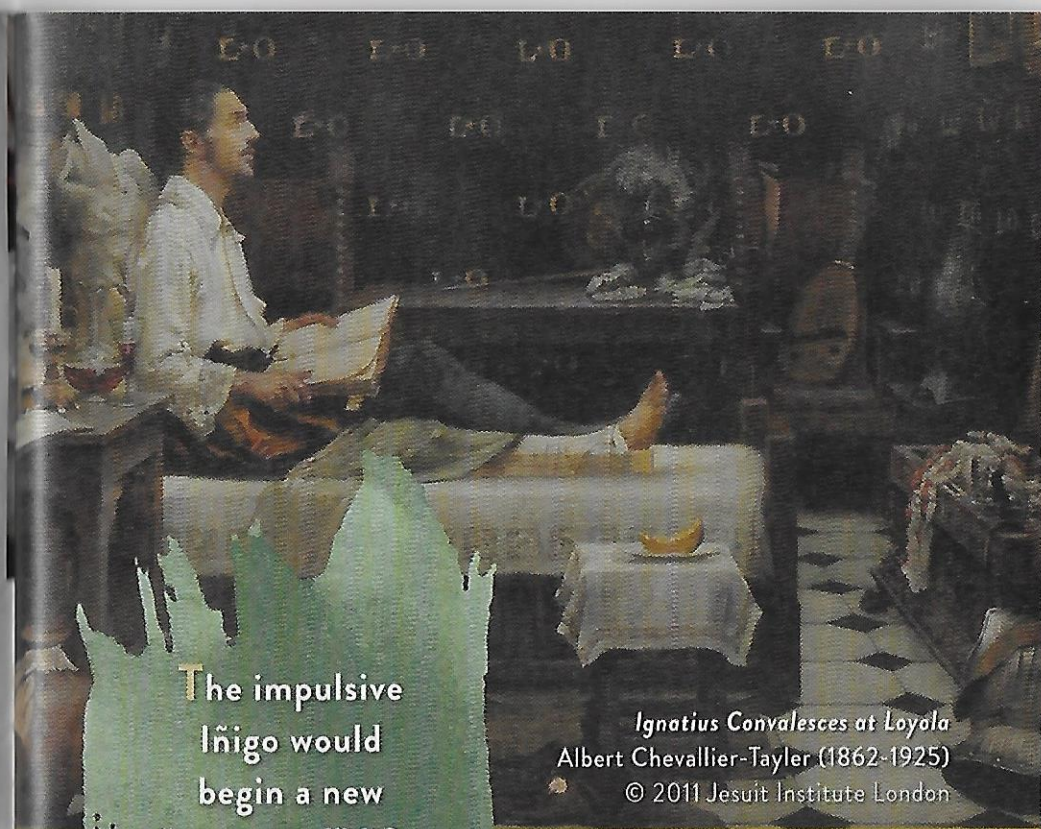
This is a graphic example of how Iñigo’s “core defect”—his desperate need for the attention and affirmation of men and women—dominated his early life. He *needed* men to admire and respect him. He *needed* women to find him handsome and attractive. And he needed these things, as he would later articulate, in a “disordered” way. Iñigo would have to go through torture before he was to learn that God is enough, that “your love and your grace are sufficient,” as he came to write in his Suscipe prayer.

### Living in His Imagination.

While convalescing at his family’s castle in Loyola, Iñigo spent a lot of time living in his imagination. As he relates in his autobiography (which he wrote in the third person), he sometimes imagined himself in the stories of Amadis de Gaul, the fictional knight-errant, and sometimes in the stories he was reading about St. Francis and St. Dominic.

When he was fantasizing about Amadis de Gaul, he could spend “two, three, or even four hours on end thinking of it, fancying what he would have to do in the service of a certain lady. . . . He was so enamored with all this that he did not see how impossible it would all be, because the lady was of no ordinary rank.” (We don’t know who this “lady” was.) But then he would spend hours imagining himself living a life like that of the saints: “What if I was to do what Francis or Dominic did?”

One day he began to notice that his fantasies about women and fighting battles left him “dry and dissatisfied,” while imagining living like the saints left him joyful and peaceful. This was the beginning of the reflective Iñigo, the St. Ignatius who would eventually give us a method for praying with our imagination.



The impulsive Iñigo would begin a new “examened” life.

*Ignatius Convalesces at Loyola*  
Albert Chevallier-Taylor (1862-1925)  
© 2011 Jesuit Institute London

### A New “Examened” Life.

Looking back, however, St. Ignatius described himself at that time as “still blind.” Indeed, as he rode away from the castle at Loyola toward the shrine of Our Lady of Montserrat where he was to begin his new life, he was still daydreaming about Amadis de Gaul and the great things he was now going to do for God instead of for a woman. His daydreams were moving in the right direction, but they were still filled with ego and self-will.

From Montserrat, Iñigo journeyed eighteen miles down the river to the small town of Manresa. It was there, as St. Ignatius recalls in his autobiography, that “God treated him just as a schoolmaster treats a little boy.” It was there that the key experiences would occur that would train the impulsive Iñigo to begin a new “examened” life. It was there that Ignatius would begin to learn all that would become the core of his teaching—Spirit-filled insights that we are still benefiting from today. Now let’s turn to the next chapter of Ignatius’ life to see how this unfolded. ■

# Separating the

# Truth from the Lie

## HOW THE EXAMEN PRAYER CAN SET US FREE

**W**e all know the value of retreats—of withdrawing from the world for a short time to focus on our lives in Christ. Iñigo arrived in Manresa and retreated to a cave—for eleven months! It was a difficult but crucial time in which he learned a great deal about himself. He learned to distinguish between the inspirations of the “good spirit”—the Holy Spirit—and the temptations of the “evil spirit”—or Satan. He also learned to recognize how the evil spirit was trying to derail his determination to grow closer to God.

While living in Manresa, Iñigo underwent two profound temptations. The first attacked his future, and the second attacked his past.

Regarding his future, Iñigo began to hear a voice in his head asking

him, “How can you stand a life like this for the seventy years you have yet to live,” a life of sacrifice and self-denial? He knew that this voice of fear and doubt was not from God; after all, he had gone to Manresa to begin a new life in the Lord. It’s a voice we ourselves have often recognized, inviting us to think the worst and to move out of the present moment into the unknown, worrisome future.

But through God’s grace, Iñigo not only recognized that this temptation was from an evil spirit, but he responded to it in a way that shows the growth he was experiencing. He answered the evil spirit, “Can you promise me even one hour of life?” He understood that the evil one could neither predict the future nor even promise him one hour. And so

responding in this way, he “remained at peace.” He learned to remain in the present and not to dwell on the future, a land mine for so many of us.

**Awakening from Sleep.** The second temptation—relating to his past—was more sinister. It was so awful that Iñigo considered taking his own life to escape it. He was bombarded by thoughts of his past sins, and no amount of scrupulously confessing them would give him relief. One day when the scruples were especially intense, he determined to go to Confession yet again. But as Iñigo explained in his autobiography, he noticed that after making the decision to go to Confession, “as a sequel,” he was seized with disgust. “It was our Lord’s way of *awakening him* as it were from sleep,” he wrote. That unexpected feeling of disgust, which seemed out of context to the situation at hand, awoke him to the action of the evil spirit in his life.

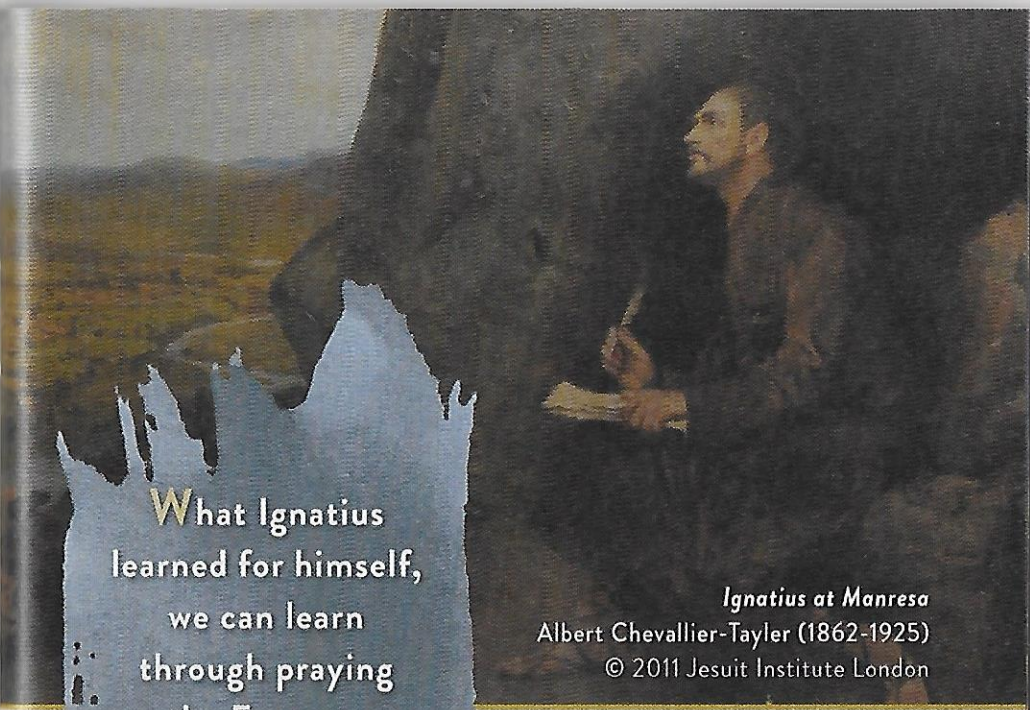
Ignatius wrote that he “now had some experience of the different spirits from the lessons he had received from God.” From that moment on, he was free from scruples.

Notice how cunning the evil spirit is! Normally, we would think of disgust at the thought of going

to Confession as a sign that we probably need to go! But in this case, it was the opposite: Iñigo saw that the disgust he felt flowed “as a sequel” to his decision and that the thought of Confession was actually coming from the evil spirit in order to further bind him in scruples. Iñigo’s freedom came from realizing *for himself* how the evil spirit was entrapping him. When he recognized what was happening, he was set free.

I want to highlight the importance of this point. What Ignatius learned for himself, we can learn through praying the Examen. Through this prayer, we learn to recognize *for ourselves* how the evil spirit attacks each of us particularly.

This is what happened to me. Several years ago, I found myself in a spiritual struggle of my own. I kept trying various solutions, and I could find nothing that worked. My wise new spiritual director asked me in our first meeting if I was praying the Examen. I said what I always used to say, which was “Yes,” and then, if pressed, “Sometimes,” and then truthfully, “No.” The truth was that I had abandoned the Examen prayer ever since my novitiate days, when a bell rang twice a day calling us to prayer.



What Ignatius  
learned for himself,  
we can learn  
through praying  
the Examen.

*Ignatius at Manresa*  
Albert Chevallier-Taylor (1862-1925)  
© 2011 Jesuit Institute London

So my new director told me to start praying the Examen again twice a day, at midday and night. I wondered, “Is that it?” I was going through a very difficult time! Like Naaman when Elisha instructed him to bathe in the Jordan River to cure his leprosy (2 Kings 5), I thought there ought to be something more dramatic! But no, I needed to start by correcting my “unexamined” life.

**The Five Steps of the Examen.** This is the method I began to use:

**Step 1.** “I give thanks for favors received.” The key for me here is

not so much gratitude as identifying what *exactly are* those favors that I have *personally received* from the Lord. I cannot examine my sins until I have first uncovered and accepted the many ways in which the Lord has loved me this day. Early on, Step 1 often took me a while, but I knew that it is the foundation of the Examen.

**Step 2.** “I ask for the grace to know my sins.” The key here is grace. Uncovering sins in my day is primarily *God’s action, not mine*. Ignatius may have learned this from his battle with scruples. God knows what defects I need to see in my day better than I do. If I examine my defects without him and

outside of the context of his love, I may start wallowing in self-pity or despair. But if his grace is in charge, I will see *only* those things he wants me to see today.

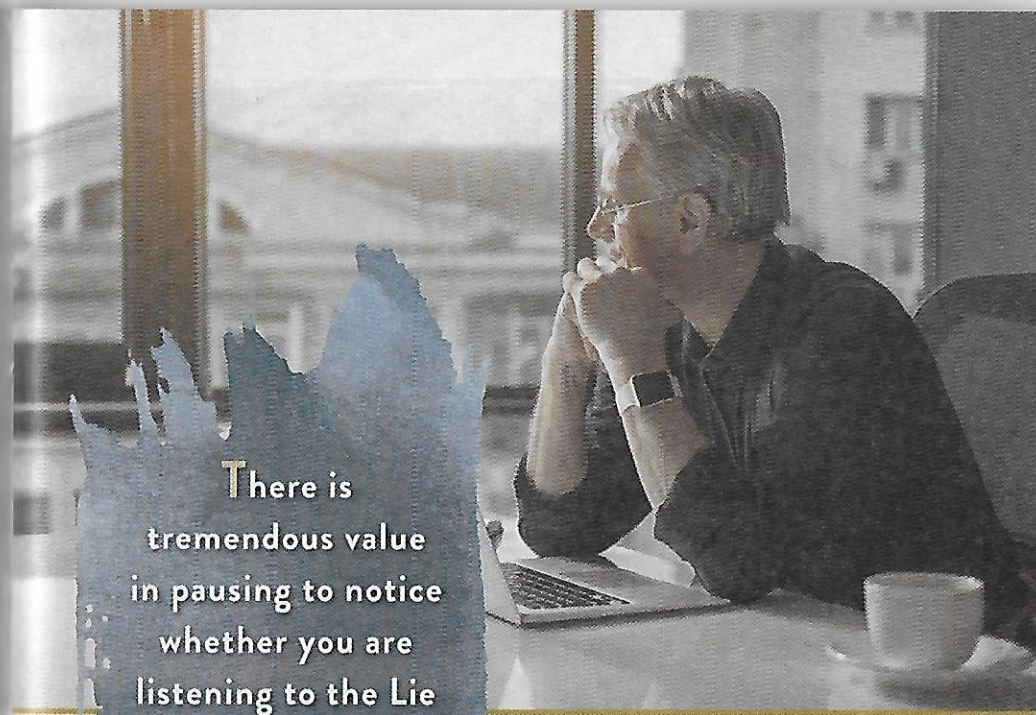
**Step 3.** “I examine my thoughts, words, and deeds from my rising to the present.” I have typically approached this third step in the mode of a similar exercise that Ignatius called the “Particular Examen”: to reflect on only one sinful habit or behavior. As Fr. Juan de Polanco, St. Ignatius’ secretary, put it, “In every person there is generally one or other sin or defect which is the source of many others.” I find that if I am just looking for sin “in general” in my day, I start drifting. I need to focus on a particular defect.

**Steps 4 and 5.** “I ask for pardon and resolve to amend with God’s grace.” Now I tell the Lord I am sorry. Through Step 1, he has *already* shown me that I am not alone and that he has been reaching out to me all day long. I resolve to root and ground myself in this love once more. I end with the prayer that Jesus taught us, which reminds me to await my daily bread from the Father who loves me and is already giving me everything I need today. He will always give me the grace I need to change.

**The Value of the Particular Examen.** As I mentioned earlier, for me the most effective way to pray through Step 3 is by using the Particular Examen. I have found that if I want to focus on a particular sin or defect, I must first be able to identify my “Lie.” Everyone’s Lie will be a little different because the evil spirit crafts our Lie from a careful scrutiny of our past, our wounds, our struggles, and our weaknesses. Our Lie is often rooted in a fear of abandonment or a deep insecurity or a fear of failure, and the evil spirit whispers this Lie into our ears from a young age.

For example, one person’s Lie might go like this: “One day everyone will leave me, and I’ll be left alone.” In praying the Particular Examen, then, she will look for moments in her day when she listened to this voice and grasped at human attention or affection rather than waiting patiently to receive it from the Father who loves her and will always give her the acceptance she needs.

Many people find that the more they are able to identify their Lie, the more the Truth of Christ’s love can set them free. I recommend that you take up the Examen once or twice a day, at midday and at



There is tremendous value in pausing to notice whether you are listening to the Lie or to the Truth.

night. There is tremendous value in pausing in the middle of the day to notice whether you are listening to the Lie or to the Truth.

### Living a “Conscious” Life.

For me, praying the Examen in this way was life changing. I slowly but surely identified my own fundamental Lie and realized how I was listening to it in small but significant ways. This was leading to behaviors that blinded me to God’s presence and were slowly beginning to destroy me. Just as slowly, God allowed me to see *for myself* the “unconscious” life I was living,

and instead, I began to live a rigorously conscious spiritual life. What the Lord did for Iñigo, he also did for me, one of his poor sons. He awakened me to the importance of living an “examined” life.

Jesus wants to give you tools like the Examen prayer that will help open your eyes and set you free. He wants you to see *for yourself* how you are being deceived by your Lie. Unlike the young fish swimming in an environment they didn’t know was water, God wants you and me to live fully conscious and aware of his presence in our lives. This is the power of St. Ignatius’ Examen, and why it is still prayed by so many people today. ■

# Surprise Me!

## OFFERING OUR LIVES TO GOD USING ST. IGNATIUS' SUSCIPE PRAYER

**B**y the end of his life, St. Ignatius of Loyola was pausing every hour to examine his thoughts, actions, and feelings. But it wasn't because he was being overly scrupulous about his sins. This hourly examination flowed only from a place of surrender and love, which was almost childlike in its totality.

For example, even at the beginning of Mass, while walking to the altar, he would sometimes murmur, "Where do you wish to take me, Lord?" And during the Mass, he might pause to whisper, "Following you, my Lord, I shall never be lost." Each of these small moments of self-offering in St. Ignatius' life flowed from the grace of the Suscipe prayer (pronounced *Su'-she-pay*). In this prayer, we offer all our memory, understanding, and will to God, with a special emphasis on our *entire* will and liberty:

Take (suscipe), Lord,  
and receive all my liberty,

my memory, my understanding, and my entire will, all that I have and possess. You have given all to me. To you, O Lord, I return it. All is yours, dispose of it wholly according to your will.  
Give me your love and your grace,  
for this is sufficient for me.

The Suscipe is a prayer of *response* to the great love that God has shown to each one of us. It comes at the end of Ignatius' month-long Spiritual Exercises, in a meditation called "The Contemplation to Attain the Love of God." St. Ignatius begins this meditation by reminding us that a "lover gives and shares with the beloved what he possesses . . . and vice versa." This lover is, of course, God, the Divine Lover.

Ignatius then asks the reader to remember "with great affection" all that God has given to him "of what he possesses"—and even more,

that God “desires to give himself to me.” In the gift of Jesus Christ, God the Lover has given to me all that he possesses. How else can I respond other than to make this offering: “Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, . . . all that I have and possess”? As the beloved, I want to offer everything back to the Divine Lover, who has already given everything to me.

St. Ignatius made this offering so wholeheartedly that he would tell a companion near the end of his life that it would take him only about fifteen minutes to accept even the destruction of his new order, the Society of Jesus. Notice the link between the Suscipe and the Examen: Ignatius had already offered *everything* to God in the Suscipe prayer—including the Society of Jesus. The Examen was the prayer that enabled him daily to live out that offering.

### Proposals of Love to God.

On the surface, it might appear as if Ignatian spirituality is rather passive, with its emphasis on surrendering our entire will and liberty. For St. Ignatius, however, the way to surrender our entire will and liberty to God does not consist in *abdication* the use of our will but rather in

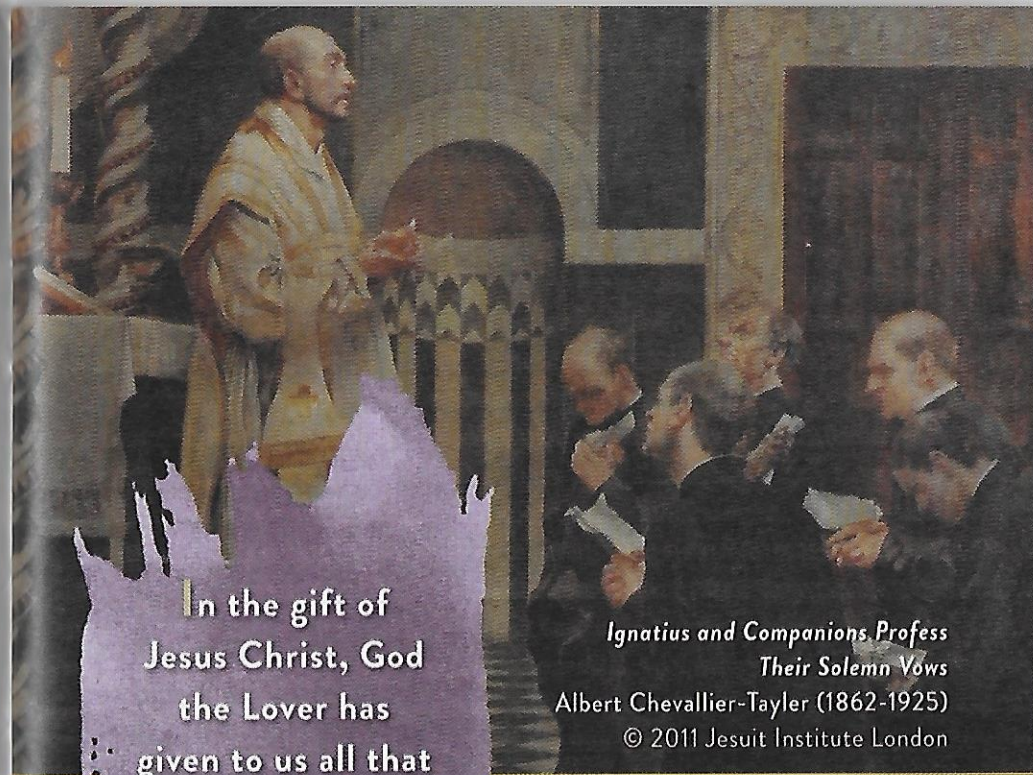
using our will *to make proposals of great love*.

Think of it this way: what kind of lover wants his beloved to tell him constantly, *Just tell me what to do and I'll do it!* That is the relationship of a servant to a master. How much more does a lover appreciate an offering made in love—one that comes from the heart—even if sometimes that offering needs to be rejected or modified. As a spiritual director, I have found that this insight is very freeing for many people.

The most effective way, then, of surrendering our entire will to God is to make frequent proposals of love, to begin to act on these proposals, and then to see if God will confirm our offering. It usually becomes clear rather quickly whether God will receive our proposals, whether through circumstances or by the sense we get as we pray or act on them.

**Successful and Failed Offerings.** For Ignatius, the Suscipe resulted in a long trail of both successful and failed offerings. Two examples from his life illustrate this point.

Following his time in Manresa, Ignatius had a strong desire to go



In the gift of  
Jesus Christ, God  
the Lover has  
given to us all that  
he possesses.

*Ignatius and Companions, Profess  
Their Solemn Vows*  
Albert Chevallier-Taylor (1862-1925)  
© 2011 Jesuit Institute London

to Jerusalem in order to be as close to the Lord as possible. It was also, in his own words, his “firm determination to remain in Jerusalem.” But the Franciscan friar who was the guardian of the holy sites just as firmly told him that he could not stay. Ignatius replied that “he had made up his mind to stay” and that “he would not give up his purpose out of any fear.”

The friar replied that he had the power to excommunicate Ignatius, and so Ignatius finally let go of his own will. He had made an offering

to the Lord: to stay in Jerusalem. But through the legitimate religious authorities in Jerusalem, God made it clear that he did not receive his offering. Ignatius learned that his proposals of love were not always God’s will for him.

At another time, Ignatius made an offering, as an act of penance, to walk seventy-three miles barefoot without eating or drinking. While he was “recommending” this offering to God in prayer, he was “seized with great fear” at so difficult an undertaking, so much so that he could “hardly get his clothes on” to begin. He could



have assumed that these feelings were from the good spirit and meant that he shouldn't go, but he went ahead and started walking.

The fear and dread he felt lasted for the first several miles of his journey, and the confirmation did not come immediately. But as he began to climb a hill, "the dread began to slip from him and in its place came so great a joy and spiritual consolation, that he began to cry out through the fields and to talk to God." These consolations made it clear to him that God was pleased with his proposal of love, and he continued walking.

**Surprise Me!** I've often thought that one of the most succinct descriptions of the Suscipe can be found in the last line of Ron Hansen's novel, *Mariette in Ecstasy*:

We try to be formed and held and kept by [God], but instead he offers us freedom. And now when I try to know his will, his kindness floods me, his great love overwhelms me, and I hear him whisper, Surprise me.

We surrender our freedom by using it, by "surprising" God with

proposals of love. His confirmation or rejection, in turn, will conform and mold our freedom to his will.

In other words, we make the offering to him, and his response to us guides us in living out his will.

In our day-to-day lives, our proposals of love won't typically be as grand as going to Jerusalem or walking barefoot for miles. But each day presents opportunities to "surprise" God by making proposals of love to him, however small, and then acting on them. If for some reason we are prevented from acting on our offering, then we should surrender it to the Lord. For example, perhaps we decided to attend daily Mass, but a lengthy phone call from a distraught friend caused us to miss it. Comforting that friend may have been exactly what God had willed for us that day. Learning to discern between "goods" is the heart of Christian discipleship. We learn to follow by recognizing the signs of confirmation or redirection.

**A Morning Offering.** Since the Examen prayer is used at mid-day and night, I suggest that you pray the Suscipe prayer first thing upon waking up. A few years ago, I began this practice for myself. That's because I had started to notice that



We surrender our freedom by using it, by "surprising" God with proposals of love.

the first thing I was doing upon awakening was checking my phone. One day in prayer, I thought, *Why am I checking my phone before I've checked in with God?*

And so I made a resolution, an offering of love to God. Now, before I do anything else, I say a prayer of offering to the Lord. Then I roll straight from the bed onto my knees (this takes some practice). This is the perfect time for the Suscipe, for making another offering to him.

Later in the day, I will check in on my faithfulness to this morning offering when I do the Examen. But for the moment, I just offer myself. I remind myself that "your love and your grace" are sufficient for me. These are all I truly need to confront

my Lie today; these are all I need to live in the Truth for one more day. Then, and *only* then, do I pick up my phone, dress, and make coffee.

We all want to offer our lives to the Lord out of love for him and to follow him as his disciples. The Examen and the Suscipe offer us tools for doing that. I pray that as you take up these practices, you will find yourself giving more and more of yourself to the Divine Lover who has already given everything to you.

Quotations from Ignatius' autobiography were taken from *St. Ignatius' Own Story as told to Luis Gonzalez de Camara*, translated by William J. Young, SJ. Quotations from *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius* were taken from the translation by Louis J. Puhl, SJ. ■