

My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As we begin this new Church year (Happy Advent), we have the opportunity to take stock of the last year and venture on how we want the next year to be. Most people do this on the calendar new year (January 1) and make all sorts of resolutions – to lose weight, to exercise, to eat right. At the beginning of the Church year, we can look at where our soul health is – How is my relationship with God? With the Church? Do I need to break free from some bondage to sin? Do I need to grow in some specific area of virtue?

The answer is that all of us need to grow closer to God and work on areas of sin and virtue... but how do so? Let's be honest, there's no easy way to just be done with old habits. Rare are the cases when we just "make up our minds" and it happens. For me, anyway, it is usually a long process of trial and error, successes and failures (more often failures than successes!), and, at times, bouts of discouragement over my inability to change and make things right.

In the first reading from Isaiah today, we can hear the discouragement of the Jewish people:

Why do you let us wander, O LORD, from your ways? (Isaiah 63:17)

Why, indeed?!!!! Just draw us back, Lord! But that's not the way God usually works. Most often, He desires our hearts, and this requires more than a quick fix, but a total dependence on Him. The reading begins and ends, though, with an acknowledgement of the deep, personal relationship with God, calling God "Father". Despite the struggle, there is trust in God's love.

So the question arises again, how do we overcome sin, grow in virtue, and strengthen our relationship with God?

The wisdom of the Church over the centuries has given many different answers, not the least of which has been that we need to depend completely on God. But there is work we must do as well. Part of that work is **noticing**. What do I mean by that? Jesus tells us to *be alert*. Alert to what? *Self-knowledge* is key for growth in any area of our lives – we can't become the best parents, employers, employees, athletes, musician, students, friends, or anything else without coming to a greater realization of our weaknesses and failures. No less in the spiritual life. We traditionally call this *the examen*.

There are two different types of *examen* – particular and general – usually done at different parts of the day. The *general examen* usually happens at the end of the day, as you look back at your whole day, and you **notice**. What do you notice? How God has been working in your life. Where has God's grace come and touched your life. Then you also **notice** – When have I cooperated with this grace? Spend time thanking God for that! When have I not cooperated with God's grace? Ask God for forgiveness for not allowing Him to move and mold you.

Taking time to **notice** our lives each day gives us awareness, and a better sense of where we need to be going on the next day. Another gift is that as we train ourselves to **notice** God's grace at the end of the day, we start to **notice** His grace as we move through the day – and so can more consciously cooperate with the grace. The general examen is like a shield which protects us.

What is the *particular examen*? This is more like a *sword*. In prayer, you determine which area of vice needs to be cut off, or which area of virtue needs to grow. The particular examen focusses on this. This may be done mid-day (say, at lunchtime). You take a few minutes to look at the time from morning until now to see how you have cooperated with God's grace in this particular area. You also notice where you have failed to cooperate with this grace. Then you plan your afternoon, how you will improve this.

If, for instance, you are trying to combat the evil of the habit of gossip that you find you too often fall into, you can look at your morning: you **notice** how you ended up spending too much time talking with Mabel on the phone, and, while it started well, it ended falling into a gossip session. You might also notice your success, when Tony came by, you quickly turned the conversation into a helpful direction, instead of useless talk of others. Then you plan your afternoon – "Okay, I know I will have to call up Adelaide... how can I make sure we don't start talking about her issues with Harold?" Asking God for guidance and help, you can attack the afternoon with a renewed resolved to grow in virtue.

With God's help, we truly can overcome sin and grow closer to the God who loves us. May we truly grow in **noticing** God's grace in our lives, and allow His Father's love to permeate our lives.