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SRG400 – Introduction to Spirituality

The Consciousness Examen and Growth in the Christian Spiritual Journey

Examen is a daily intensive exercise of discernment of spirits in a person's life.¹ These spirits may be described as the spontaneous urges and movements that occur within the consciousness and experience of all people.² These spontaneities are of two types – one good and for God; the other evil and not for God.³ For the believer, therefore, the challenge is not simply to let the spontaneous happen, but rather to be able to sift out the various spontaneities, and then to give expression to those that are from God.⁴ Examen of consciousness plays a central role in this process.⁵

When examen involves discernment, the phrase *examen of consciousness*, rather than of conscience, is more accurate. The difference in terms is contrasted in figure 1 below:

EXAMEN OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND CONSCIENCE: A COMPARISON

Examen of Consciousness	Examen of Conscience
Focus: How God is affecting and moving one deep in one's affective consciousness?	Focus: What is the morality – good or bad – of actions done each day?
Concern: How is one experiencing the “drawing” of God, and how is one being lured away from God?	Concern: What has been one's response to God's drawing seen in one's actions?

¹ George Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen”, *Review for Religious* 31, no. 1 (1972): 14.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

Related to: Discernment.	Related to: Preparation for Sacrament of Reconciliation. ⁶
Question: What is happening in one's consciousness prior to actions?	Question: Are actions juridically good or evil?

Fig. 1. Comparison Between Examen of Consciousness and Examen of Conscience.

Source: George Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen", *Review for Religious* 31, no. 1 (1972): 14-15.

This paper has a two-fold thrust. First, it describes the five step examen of consciousness developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola⁷ and suggests a five-letter mnemonic – T.E.A.C.H. – to assist practitioners in their implementation of the examen. Second, and more importantly, the paper shows how St. Ignatius' examen of consciousness contributes to growth in the Christian spiritual journey. The basis of the paper is an integration of the concepts described in three respected articles on the subject: the first, George

⁶ Phyllis Zagano, "Examen of Consciousness: Finding God in All Things" [article online] (An AmericanCatholic.org Web Site from the Franciscans and St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1996-2008 Copyright, accessed 5 March 2008); available from :

<http://www.americancatholic.org/newsletters/cu/ac0303.asp>; Internet. Zagano adds this detail: "The *Examen* is not the same as an "examination of conscience," such as you engage in before meeting Jesus in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The *Examen* is a methodical prayer that helps you meet Jesus in your daily life, as he encourages you to do God's will. The *Examen* helps you grow in spiritual sensitivity and helps you recognize and receive God's care and assistance."

⁷ Zagano, "Examen of Consciousness". In her introductory paragraph, Zagano gives the following helpful background to the examen: "St. Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), founder of the Society of Jesus, was a very practical man when it came to prayer. He recommended to his brothers a daily method of examining their lives so that they might better serve the Lord. St. Ignatius taught that the key to a healthy spirituality was twofold: Find God in all things and constantly work to gain freedom to cooperate with God's will. St. Ignatius proposed a daily exercise, which he called the *Examen*, that has been used by many Christians ever since. By praying the *Examen* twice daily, countless laypeople worldwide have joined the practice of Jesuits, other priests and the religious—in hearing God's voice in their hearts. Through this daily practice, they learn to discern God's will and grow in the understanding of God's beautiful creation. Now called the *Examen* of Consciousness, it is a simple practice that anyone can learn and benefit from."

Aschenbrenner's "Consciousness Examen"⁸; second, Peter Van Breemen's "The Examination of Conscience"⁹; and third, Phyllis Zagano's "Examen of Consciousness: Finding God in All Things".¹⁰

The mnemonic is conveniently based on the key word in the disciple's request, "Lord, *teach* us to pray" (Lk 11:1, emphasis mine). St. Ignatius' *Spiritual Exercises* have taught countless disciples how to pray more effectively. Figure 2 shows the five movements of the examen of consciousness.

Steps in the Examen of Consciousness	
T	Thanksgiving to God
E	Enlightenment prayer
A	Accounting of one's actions
C	Contrition and sorrow
H	Hopeful resolution for the future

Fig. 2. Five Steps in the Examen of Consciousness

Source: George Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen", *Review for Religious* 31, no. 1 (1972): 14-21; and Peter Van Breemen, "The Examination of Conscience", *Review for Religious* 49, no. 4 (1990): 600-609.

The five movements, or steps, in the examen of consciousness are described as follows, together with their contribution to growth in the Christian spiritual journey.

⁸ Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen", 14-21.

⁹ Peter Van Breemen, "The Examination of Conscience", *Review for Religious* 49, no. 4 (1990): 600-609.

¹⁰ Phyllis Zagano, "Examen of Consciousness".

Thanksgiving to God

In his *Spiritual Exercises*,¹¹ Ignatius places the prayer of thanksgiving as the first part of the examen. (Aschenbrenner states that the first two parts of the examen can be interchanged without too much difference.¹²) After the individual recalls being in the presence of God, he or she can look back in gratitude on the experiences of the past day or half day and give thanks for the gifts. (Of course, one is always in the presence of God, but in prayer one places oneself in His presence in an especially attentive way.¹³) A person's gratitude should also center on the concrete, uniquely personal gifts that they have been blessed with – both simple and profound; whether tiny and apparently insignificant, or whether large and obviously important.¹⁴ Zagano elaborates on this first step by stating that God can be found in the concrete details of the day, and this step helps a person recall that every sunrise, every raindrop, every single breath they take is a gift of the God who loves people in the deepest possible way.¹⁵ In sum, as a person takes stock of what has been given, they should also recall the gifts of their own creation – the special and perfect way God has made them to bring God's grace to others.¹⁶ Gradually God will lead one to deeply realize that *all is gift* – consequently, it is right to give him praise and thanks at the beginning.¹⁷

¹¹ The *Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola*, written within 1522-1524, are a brief set of meditations, prayers and mental exercises, available in various book formats, designed to be carried out over a period of 28 to 30 days. The book is approximately 200 pages long. They were written with the intention of enhancing and strengthening one's faith-experience. (This short summary was taken from *Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia*, s.v. "Ignatius of Loyola"; available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ignatius_of_Loyola; Internet; accessed 7 March 2008.)

¹² Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen", 17.

¹³ Phyllis Zagano, "Examen of Consciousness".

¹⁴ Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen", 17.

¹⁵ Zagano, "Examen of Consciousness".

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen", 17.

A specific point of growth here is what Ignatius terms the right “ordering of one’s life” – to acknowledge God and to serve him.¹⁸ This is growing in mature thankfulness that leads to the right attitude towards the source of all good – being aware of one’s dependence and able to acknowledge and accept it with a thankful heart.¹⁹ The believer can grow to experience everything as a gift in which the Giver is present – things, situations, and people – and to thereby find God in all things.²⁰ Growing in thankfulness allows one to transcend the self by freeing oneself from self-sufficiency, pride, and self-conceit.²¹

Enlightenment Prayer

The next step in the examen is an explicit petition for enlightenment – which will occur in and through a person’s own powers, but which their own natural powers could never be capable of all by themselves.²² The examen is not simply a matter of a person’s natural power of memory and analysis in going back over a part of the day.²³ It is a matter of Spirit-guided insight into their life and courageously responsive sensitivity to God’s call in their heart.²⁴ Without the Father’s revealing grace, this kind of insight is not possible.²⁵

As a point of growth here, Zagano adds that a person should ask in a special way for the Holy Spirit to come into their heart in order to help them look at their actions clearly and with an understanding of their own limitations – in other words, to learn more

¹⁸ Van Breemen, “The Examination of Conscience”, 606.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid., 606-607.

²¹ Van Breemen, “The Examination of Conscience”, 607-608.

²² Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen”, 17.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

about their behavior and motivations.²⁶ The Spirit will help a person to understand the mystery of their human heart.²⁷

Accounting of One's Actions

The main concern here is what has been happening to and in a person – how has the Lord been working, and what has He been asking.²⁸ This part of the examen presumes that a person has grown sensitive to their interior feelings, moods, and slightest urgings – and has learned to take them seriously.²⁹ It is here in the depths of a person's affectivity – so spontaneous, strong, and shadowy at times – that God moves them and deals with them most intimately.³⁰ A person's interior moods, feelings, urges, and movements are the “spirits” that must be discerned and sifted out so that the person can recognize the Lord's call to them in this intimate core of their being.³¹ This assumes a genuine faith approach to life – a life that is first listening (having an attitude of receptivity, passivity, and poverty), *then* acting in response (responding in one's own activity).³² Rather than being a practical, programmed approach to perfection, the examen is meant to be a reverently honest, personal meeting with the Lord in a person's heart.³³ Correspondingly, the growing faith sense of a person's sinfulness is central – however, this is more of a spiritual faith reality as revealed by the Father in their experience, than a heavily moralistic and guilt-laden reality.³⁴ Also, a deep sense of sinfulness depends on a person's growth in faith and is a

²⁶ Zagano, “Examen of Consciousness”.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen”, 18.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

dynamic realization which always ends in thanksgiving – the song of a “saved sinner”.³⁵ Zagano adds that a person should be sure to notice the details, the context of what happened, and how they acted.³⁶ Also, as a person looks back since the last examen,³⁷ they should notice especially their interior motives and feelings – and to look for signs of those things that are causing them to act with less than perfect freedom, given the circumstances of their life.³⁸

A point of growth here is learning attentiveness to one’s feelings. In fact, listening to one’s feelings is an exercise in authenticity – in self-acceptance and in “being oneself”.³⁹ Suppressing feelings is unreal; it is being dishonest – it blocks and suffocates life.⁴⁰ It is not until a person grows to become aware of what is going on within them, that they will be able to test their feelings and do something with them.⁴¹ Based on Ignatius, Van Breemen notes that a person needs “to observe carefully and to find out which feelings make it easier for [them] to believe, hope, and love, and which lead to want of faith, hope, and love.”⁴² It is important for a person to stay close to their own experiences and that in them they should discover God’s nearness again and again.⁴³

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Zagano, “Examen of Consciousness”.

³⁷ The frequency of the examen can be different for different people. Once a day, and then preferably before going to bed, is a good natural rhythm. Ignatius speaks explicitly and implicitly in his writings of twice a day. When he mentions the duration, it is always a quarter of an hour. (Notes taken from Van Breemen, page 604.)

³⁸ Zagano, “Examen of Consciousness”.

³⁹ Van Breemen, “The Examination of Conscience”, 603.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid. Van Breemen parallels the terminology of St. Paul where the same question would be: Do they make the fruits of the Spirit grow or diminish – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal 5:22)?

⁴³ Van Breemen, “The Examination of Conscience”, 604.

Contrition and Sorrow

Sorrow will especially spring from the lack of honesty and courage in responding to the Lord's call in the particular examen.⁴⁴ This contrition and sorrow is not a shame or a depression over a person's weakness, but a faith experience as they grow in their realization of the Father's awesome desire that they love Him with every ounce of their being.⁴⁵ A person feels the sorrow in their heart as they apologize – but they also feel the gratitude when they give thanks for God's gentle work inside their heart as he continually labors to make them more Christ-like, day by day.⁴⁶ This is the song of a sinner, constantly aware of being prey to his or her sinful tendencies, and yet being converted into the newness which is guaranteed in the victory of the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴⁷

Here a particular point of growth is that this contrition truly sets free by asking God and fellow humans for forgiveness. It means growing in godly contrition or grief which “produces a repentance that leads to salvation and brings no regret, but worldly grief produces death” (2 Cor 7:10).

Hopeful Resolution for the Future

Finally in the examen, a person should have a great desire to face the future with renewed vision and sensitivity as they pray to recognize even more the subtle ways in which the Lord will greet them and to hear His Word call them in the existential situation

⁴⁴ Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen”, 20.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Zagano, “Examen of Consciousness”.

⁴⁷ Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen”, 19.

of the future – and to respond to His call with more faith, humility, and courage.⁴⁸ A great hope should be the atmosphere of a person’s heart at this point – founded more fully in the Father whose glorious victory in Jesus Christ they share through the life of Their Spirit in the heart.

In this last stage, a person grows to discover how God reveals himself in what goes on inside of them and in what happens around them – it is a growth in finding God in all things, which yields hopeful spirit.⁴⁹ Growing in hope keeps alive the faith-dimension of one’s existence.

Conclusion

The examen of consciousness is an experience in faith of growing sensitivity over time to the unique, intimately special ways that the Lord’s Spirit has of approaching and calling a person.⁵⁰ Aschenbrenner states that the examen assumes real value when it becomes a person’s daily renewal and growth of their unique religious identity, and they recognize how the Lord is subtly and profoundly inviting them to deepen and develop this identity.⁵¹ In other words, the examen helps a person to grow in spiritual sensitivity and helps them to recognize and receive God’s care and assistance.⁵²

Finally, practicing the examen⁵³ will lead a person to grow in discovering how God reveals himself in the movements of their heart and mind, and how God may be found in their inner experiences, as well as in all things.⁵⁴

⁴⁸ Ibid., 20.

⁴⁹ Van Breemen, “The Examination of Conscience”, 600-601.

⁵⁰ Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen”, 15.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Zagano, “Examen of Consciousness”.

⁵³ Ibid. Zagano concludes her article with the following comment: “The *Examen* of Consciousness is the heart of the spirituality developed by St. Ignatius Loyola and his followers. If practiced once or twice daily, it will help move you closer to the heart of Christ in all your thoughts and deeds. The point of it is to find the

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sources of unfreedom in your life – old habits, people, situations, conditions – that lead you to make cramped choices away from what would be God’s will. The more we notice how we can change and move toward God like flowers to the sun, the freer we become. As God continually labors within us to make us more like His Son, we can either cooperate with his unfolding creation or freely choose not to. The choice is ours, and, like the prophets, Ignatius reminds us to ‘Choose life!’”

⁵⁴ Van Breemen, "The Examination of Conscience", 602.