

Consciousness Examen

George Aschenbrenner SJ

Examen is a practice without much significance for many people in their spiritual lives. This is true for a variety of reasons; but all the reasons amount to the admission (rarely explicit) that it is not of immediate practical value in a busy day. My point in this booklet is that all these reasons and their false conclusion spring from a basic misunderstanding of this spiritual practice. Examen must be seen in relationship to discernment of spirits. It is a daily, intensive exercise of discernment in a person's life.

Examen of Consciousness

For many people today life is spontaneity, if anything. If spontaneity is crushed or aborted, then life itself is stillborn. In this view, examen is living life backwards and once removed from the vibrant spontaneity and immediacy of the experience itself. These people today disagree with Socrates' claim that the unexamined life is not worth living. For these people the Spirit is in the spontaneous and so anything that militates against spontaneity is not of the Spirit.

This view overlooks the fact that welling up in the consciousness and experience of each of us are two spontaneities, one good and for God, another evil and not for God. These two types of spontaneous urges and movements happen to all of us. So often the quick-witted, loose-tongued person who can be so entertaining and the center of attention and who is always characterized as being so spontaneous is not certainly being moved by and giving expression to the good spontaneity. For people eager to love God with their whole being, the challenge is not simply to let the spontaneous happen but rather to be able to sift through these various spontaneous urges and give full existential ratification to those spontaneous feelings that are from and for God. We do this by allowing the truly Spirited-spontaneity to happen in our daily lives. But we must learn the feel of this true Spiritual-spontaneity. Examen has a very central role in this learning.

When examen is related to discernment, it becomes examen of *consciousness* rather than of conscience. Examen of conscience has narrow moralistic overtones. Its prime concern was with the good or bad actions we had done each day. Whereas in discernment the prime concern is not with the morality of good or bad actions; rather the concern is with the way God is affecting and moving us (often quite spontaneously!) deep in our own affective consciousness. What is happening in our consciousness is prior to and more important than our actions, which can be delineated as juridically good or evil. How we are experiencing the "drawing" of God¹ in our own existential consciousness and how our sinful nature is quietly tempting

¹ John 6:44

us and luring us away from intimacy with God in the subtle dispositions of our consciousness—this is what the daily examen is concerned with prior to a concern for our response in our *actions*. Hence it is examen of consciousness that we are concerned with here, so that we can cooperate with and let happen that beautiful spontaneity in our hearts that is the touch of God and the urging of the Spirit.

Examen and Spiritual Identity

The examen we are talking about here is not a Ben Franklin-like striving for self-perfection. We are talking about an experience in faith of growing sensitivity to the unique, intimately special ways that God’s Spirit has of approaching and calling us. Obviously it takes time for this growth. But in this sense examen is a daily renewal and growth in our spiritual identity as unique flesh-spirit persons loved and called by God in the inner intimacy of our affective world. It is not possible for us to make an examen without confronting our own unique identity in imitation of Christ before God.

And yet so often our daily examen becomes so general and vague and unspecific that our unique spiritual identity does not seem to make any difference. Examen assumes real value when it becomes a daily experience of confrontation and renewal of our unique spiritual identity and how God is subtly inviting us to deepen and develop this identity. We should make our examen each time with as precise a grasp as we have now on our spiritual identity. We do not make it just as any Christian but as this specific Christian person with a unique vocation and grace in faith.

Examen and Prayer

The examen is a time of prayer. The dangers of an empty self-reflection or an unhealthy self-centered introspection are very real. On the other hand, a lack of effort at examen and the approach of living according to what comes

naturally keep us quite superficial and insensitive to the subtle and profound ways of God deep in our hearts. The prayerful quality and effectiveness of the examen itself depend upon its relationship to our continuing contemplative prayer. Without this relationship examen slips to the level of self-reflection for self-perfection, if it perdures at all.

In daily contemplative prayer, God carefully reveals to us the order of the mystery of all reality in Christ—as Paul says to the Colossians: “those to whom God has planned to give a vision of the full wonder and splendor of the secret plan for the nations.”²

The contemplator experiences in many subtle, chiefly non-verbal, ways this revelation of God in Christ. The presence of the Spirit of the risen Jesus in the heart of the believer makes it possible to sense and “hear” this invitation (challenge!) to order ourselves to this revelation. Contemplation is empty without this “ordering” response.

This kind of reverent, docile (the “obedience of faith” Paul speaks of in Romans 16:26), and non-moralistic ordering is the work of the daily examen—to sense and recognize those interior invitations of God that guide and deepen this ordering from day to day and not to cooperate with those subtle insinuations opposed to that ordering. Without that contemplative contact with God’s revelation of reality in Christ, both in formal prayer and informal prayerfulness, the daily practice of examen becomes empty; it shrivels up and dies. Without this “listening” to the revelation of God’s ways, which are so different from our own,³ examen again becomes that shaping up of ourselves, which is human and natural self-perfection, or, even worse, it can corrupt into a selfish ordering of ourselves to our own ways.

Examen without regular contemplation is futile. A failure at regular contemplation emaciates the beautifully rich experience of responsible ordering that the contemplative is

² Colossians 1:27

³ Isaiah 55:8-9

continually invited to by God. It is true, on the other hand, that contemplation without regular examen becomes compartmentalized and superficial and stunted in our lives. The time of formal prayer can become a very sacrosanct period in our day but so isolated from the rest of our life that we are not prayerful (finding God in all things) at that level where we really live. The examen gives our daily contemplative experience of God real bite into all our daily living; it is an important means to finding God in everything and not just in the time of formal prayer, as will be explained at the end of this booklet.

A Discerning Vision of Heart

When we first learn and practice the examen, it seems stylized and artificial. This problem is not in the examen-prayer but in ourselves; we are beginners and have not yet worked out that integration in ourselves of a process of personal discernment to be expressed in daily examens. As beginners, before we have achieved much of a personalized integration, an exercise or process can be very valuable and yet seem formal and stylized. This should not put us off. It will be the inevitable experience for the beginner and for the “old-timer” who is beginning again at examen.

But examen will always be fundamentally misunderstood if the goal of this exercise is not grasped. The specific exercise of examen is ultimately aimed at developing a heart with a discerning vision to be active not only for one or two quarter-hour periods in a day but continually. This is a gift from God—a most important one as Solomon realized.⁴ So we must constantly pray for this gift, but we must also be receptive to its development within our hearts. A daily practice of examen is essential to this development.

Hence the five steps of this exercise of examen as presented in the *Spiritual Exercises*⁵ of Saint Ignatius Loyola are to be seen, and gradually experienced in faith, as dimensions of the Christian consciousness, formed by God’s work

in the heart as it confronts and grows within this world and all of reality. If we allow God gradually to transform our mind and heart into that of Jesus, to become truly Christian, through our living experience in this world, then the examen, with its separate elements now seen as integrated dimensions of our own consciousness looking out on the world, is much more organic to our outlook and will seem much less contrived. So there is no ideal length of time arbitrarily set for each of the five elements of the examen when it is practiced. Rather the examen is a daily organic expression of the spiritual mood of our heart. At one time we are drawn to one element longer than the others and at another time to another element over the others.

The mature Ignatius near the end of his life was always examining every movement and inclination of his heart, which means he was *discerning* the congruence of everything with his true Christ-centered self. This was the overflow of those regular intensive prayer exercises of examen every day. As beginners or ‘old-timers’ we must understand both the point of the one or two quarter-hour exercises of examen each day, namely, a continually discerning heart, and of the necessary gradual adaptation of our practice of examen to our stage of development and the situation in the world in which we now find ourselves. And yet we are all aware of the subtle rationalization of giving up formal examen each day because we have ‘arrived at’ that continually discerning heart. This kind of rationalization will prevent further growth in faith sensitivity to the ways of the Holy Spirit in our daily lives.

Let us now take a look at the format of the examen as presented by Saint Ignatius in the *Spiritual Exercises*, but in light of these previous comments on examen as discerning consciousness within the world.

Prayer for Enlightenment

In the *Exercises* Ignatius has an act of thanksgiving as the first pair of the examen.

⁴ 1 Kings 3:9-12

⁵⁵ *Spiritual Exercises* n.43

The first two parts could be interchanged without too much difference. In fact, I would suggest the prayer for enlightenment as a fitting introduction to the examen.

The examen is not simply a matter of the natural power of our memory and analysis going back over a part of the day. It is a matter of Spirit-guided insight into our life and courageously responsive sensitivity to God's call in our heart. What we are seeking here is that gradually growing appreciative insight into the mystery that I am. Without God's revealing grace this kind of insight is not possible. We must be careful not to get locked into the world of our own human natural powers. Our technological world poses a special danger in this regard. Founded on a deep appreciation of the humanly interpersonal, the Christian in faith transcends the boundaries of the here and now with its limited natural causality and discovers a God who loves and works in and through and beyond all. For this reason we begin the examen with an explicit petition for the enlightenment that will occur in and through our own powers, but which our own natural powers could never accomplish all by themselves. That the Spirit may help us to see ourselves a bit more as God sees us!

Reflective Thanksgiving

Our stance as Christians in the midst of the world is that of poor persons, possessing nothing, not even ourselves, and yet being gifted at every instant in and through everything. When we become too affluently involved with ourselves and deny our inherent poverty, then we lose the gifts and either begin to make demands for what we think we deserve (often leading to angry frustration) or we blandly take for granted *all* that comes our way. Only the truly poor person can appreciate the slightest gift and feel genuine gratitude. The more deeply we live in faith the more we become aware of how poor we are and how gifted; life itself becomes humble, joyful thanksgiving. This should gradually become an element of our abiding consciousness.

After the introductory prayer for enlightenment our hearts should rest in genuine faith-filled gratitude to God for the personal gifts of this most recent part of our day. Perhaps in the spontaneity of the happening we were not aware of the gift and now in this exercise of reflective prayer we see the events in a very different perspective. Our sudden gratitude—now the act of a humble selfless pauper—helps make us ready to discover the gift more clearly in a future sudden spontaneity. Our gratitude should center on the concrete, uniquely personal gifts that each of us is blessed with, whether large and obviously important or tiny and apparently insignificant. There is much in our lives that we take for granted; gradually God will lead us to a deep realization that *all is gift*. It is only right to give praise and thanks!

Practical Survey of Actions

In this third element of the examen ordinarily we rush to review, in some specific detail, our actions of that part of the day just finished so we can catalogue them as good or bad. Just what we shouldn't do! Our prime concern here in faith is with what has been happening to and in us since the last examen. The operative questions are: What has been happening in us? How has God been working in us? What is being asked of us? And only secondarily are our own actions to be considered. This part of the examen presumes that we have become sensitive to our interior feelings, moods, and slightest urgings and that we are not frightened by them but have learned to take them very seriously. It is here in the depths of our affectivity, at times so spontaneous and strong, and at other times so shadowy, that God moves us and deals with us most intimately. These interior moods, feelings, urges, and movements are the "spirits" that must be sifted through, discerned, so we can recognize God's call to us at this intimate core of our being. As we have said above, the examen is a chief means to this discerning of our interior consciousness.

This presumes a real faith approach to life—that life is first listening, then acting in response:

‘The fundamental attitude of the believer is of one who listens. It is to the Lord’s utterances that he gives ear. In as many different ways and on as many varied levels as the listener can discern the word and will of the Lord manifested to him, he must respond with all the Pauline “obedience of faith.” . . . It is the attitude of receptivity, passivity, and poverty of one who is always in need, radically dependent, conscious of his creaturehood.’⁶

Hence the great need for interior quiet, peace, and a passionate receptivity that attunes us to listening to God’s word at every instant and in every situation and *then* responding in our own activity. Again in a world that is founded more on activity (becoming activism), productivity, and efficiency (whereas efficacy is a norm for the kingdom of God!). This faith view is implicitly, if not explicitly, challenged at every turn in the road.

And so our first concern here is with these subtle, intimate, affective ways in which God has been dealing with us during these past few hours. Perhaps we did not recognize God calling in that past moment, but now our vision is clear and direct. Secondly our concern is with our actions insofar as they were *responses* to the calling of the Holy Spirit. So often our activity becomes primary to us and all sense of response in our activity is lost. We become self-moved and motivated rather than moved and motivated by the Spirit.⁷ This is a subtle lack of faith and failure to live as a son or daughter of God. In the light of faith it is the *quality* of responsiveness of the activity, more than the activity itself, which makes the difference for the kingdom of God.

In this general review there is no strain to reproduce every second since the last examen; rather, our concern is with specific details and incidents as they reveal patterns and bring

some clarity and insight. This brings us to a consideration of what Ignatius calls the particular examen.

This element of the examen, perhaps more than any other, has been misunderstood. It has often become an effort to divide and conquer by moving down the list of vices or up the list of virtues in a mechanically planned approach to self-perfection. A certain amount of time was spent on each vice or virtue one by one, and then we moved on to the next one on the list. Rather than a practical programmed approach to perfection, the particular examen is meant to be a reverently honest, personal meeting with the Holy Spirit of God in our own hearts.

When we become sensitive and serious enough about loving God, we begin to realize some changes must be made. We are deficient in so many areas and so many defects must be done away with. But God does not want all of them to be handled at once. Usually there is one area of our hearts where God is especially calling for conversion, which is always the beginning of new life. God is interiorly nudging us in one area and reminding us that if we are really serious about life in the Spirit, this one aspect of ourselves must be changed. This is often precisely the one area we want to forget and (maybe!) work on later.

We do not want to let God’s word condemn us in this one area and so we try to forget it and distract ourselves by working on some other safer area that *does* require conversion but not with the same urgent sting of consciousness that is true of the former area. It is in this first area of our hearts, if we will be honest and open with God, where we are very personally experiencing the fire of the Holy Spirit confronting us here and now. So often we fail to recognize this guilt for what it really is or we try to blunt it by working hard on something else that we may want to correct whereas God wants something else here and now. For

⁶ David Asselin SJ, *Christian Maturity and Spiritual Discernment in the Review for Religious*, v. 27 (1968) p.594

⁷ Romans 8:14

beginners it takes time to become interiorly sensitive to God before they gradually come to recognize the Spirit's call to conversion (maybe involving a very painful struggle!) in some area of their lives. It is better for beginners to take this time to learn what God wants their particular examen now to be rather than just taking some assigned imperfection to get started on.

And so the particular examen is very personal, honest, and at times a very subtle experience of the Spirit calling in our hearts for deeper conversion. The matter of the conversion may remain the same for a long period of time, but the important thing is our sense of this personal challenge to us. Often this experience of God's calling for conversion in one small part of our hearts takes the expression of good healthy guilt which should be carefully interpreted and responded to if there is to be progress in holiness. When the particular examen is seen as God's uniquely personal invitation to greater intimacy in faith, then we can understand why Saint Ignatius suggests that we turn our whole consciousness to this call of the Holy Spirit, beyond the formal examen itself, at those two important moments of every day: its beginning and its close.

In this third dimension of the formal examen, the growing faith sense of our sinfulness is very central. This is more of a spiritual faith reality as revealed by God in our experience than a heavily moralistic and guilt-laden reality. A deep sense of sinfulness depends on our growth in faith and is a dynamic realization which always ends in thanksgiving—the song of a “saved sinner.”

In his book *Growth in the Spirit*,⁸ Francois Roustang, in the second chapter, speaks very profoundly about sinfulness and thanksgiving. This can provide enormous insight into the relationship of these second and third elements of the formal examen, especially as

dimensions of our abiding Christian consciousness.

Contrition and Sorrow

The Christian heart is always a heart in song—a song of deep joy and gratitude. But the Alleluia can be quite superficial and without body and depth unless it is genuinely touched with sorrow. This is our song as sinners constantly aware of being prey to our sinful tendencies and yet being converted into the newness, which is guaranteed in the victory of Jesus Christ. Hence, we never grow out of a sense of wonderful sorrow in the presence of our Savior.

This basic dimension of our heart's vision, which God desires to deepen in us as we are converted from sin, is here applied to the specifics of our actions since the last examen, especially insofar as they were selfishly inadequate *responses* to God's work in our hearts. This sorrow will especially spring from the lack of honesty and courage in responding to God's call in the particular examen. This contrition and sorrow is not a shame nor a depression at our weakness but a faith experience as we grow in our realization of our dear God's awesome desire that we love with every ounce of our being.

After this description, the value of pausing each day in formal examen and giving concrete expression to this abiding sense of sorrow in our hearts should be quite obvious and should flow naturally from the third element of practical survey of our actions.

Hopeful Resolution for Future

This final element of the formal daily examen grows very naturally out of the previous elements. The organic development leads us to face the future which is now rising to encounter us and become integrated into our lives. In the light of our present discernment of the immediate past how do we look to the

⁸ Francois Roustang SJ, *Une Initiation à la Vie Spirituelle* (Desclée de Brouwer 1963)

future? Are we discouraged or despondent or fearful of the future? If this is the atmosphere of our hearts now, we must wonder why and try to interpret this atmosphere; we must be honest in acknowledging our feeling for the future, and not repress it by hoping it will go away.

The precise expression of this final element will be determined by the organic flow of this precise examen now. Accordingly, this element of resolution for the immediate future will never happen the same way each time. If it did happen in the same expression each time, it would be a sure sign that we were not really entering into the previous four elements of the examen.

At this point in the examen there should be a great desire to face the future with renewed vision and sensitivity as we pray both to recognize even more the subtle ways in which God will greet us and to recognize the Spirit calling us in the existential situation of the future, and then to respond to that call with more faith, humility, and courage. This should be especially true of that intimate abiding experience of the particular examen. A great hope should be the atmosphere of our hearts at this point—a hope not founded on our own deserts or our own powers for the future, but rather founded much more fully in our God whose glorious victory in Jesus Christ we share through the life of the Spirit in our hearts. The more we will trust and allow God to lead in our lives, the more we will experience true supernatural hope in God painfully in and through, but quite beyond, our own weak powers—an experience at times frightening and emptying but ultimately joyfully exhilarating.

Saint Paul in this whole passage from the Letter to the Philippians⁹ expresses well the spirit of this conclusion of the formal examen: “I leave the past behind and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead I go straight for the goal.”¹⁰

Examen and Discernment

We will close this booklet with some summary remarks about the examen, as here described, and discernment of spirits. When examen is understood in this light and so practiced each day, then it becomes so much more than just a brief exercise performed once or twice a day and which is quite secondary to our formal prayer and active living of God’s love in our daily situation. Rather it becomes an exercise that so focuses and renews our specific faith identity that we should be even more reluctant to omit our examen than our formal contemplative prayer each day. This seems to have been Saint Ignatius’s view of the practice of the examen. He never talks of omitting it though he does talk of adapting and abbreviating the daily meditation for various reasons. For him it seems the examen was central and quite inviolate. This strikes us as strange until we revamp our understanding of the examen. Then perhaps we begin to see the examen as so intimately connected to our growing identity and so important to our finding God in all things at all times that it becomes our central daily experience of prayer.

For Ignatius, finding God in all things is what life is all about. Near the end of his life, he said that “Whenever he wished, at whatever hour, he could find God.”¹¹ This is the mature Ignatius who had so fully allowed God to possess every ounce of his being through a clear, abandoning *Yes* that radiated from the very core of his being, that he could be conscious at any moment he wanted of the deep peace, joy, and contentment (consolation, see the *Exercises* n.316), which was the experience of God at the center of his heart. Ignatius’s identity, at this point in his life, was quite fully and clearly “in Christ” as Paul says: “For now my place is in him, and I am not dependent upon any of the self-achieved righteousness of the Law.”¹² Ignatius knew and was his true self in Christ.

⁹ Philippians 3:7-14

¹⁰ Philippians 3:13-14

¹¹ *Autobiography* n.99

¹² Philippians 3:9

Being able to find God whenever he wanted, Ignatius was now able to find that God of love in all things through a test for congruence of any interior impulse, mood or feeling with his true self. Whenever he found interior consonance within himself (which registers as peace, joy, contentment again) from the immediate interior movement and felt himself being his true congruent self, then he knew he had heard God's word to him at that instant. And he responded with that fullness of humble courage so typical of Ignatius. If he discovered interior dissonance, agitation, and disturbance "at the bottom of the heart" (to be carefully distinguished from repugnance "at the top of the head"¹³ and could not find his true congruent self in Christ, then he recognized the interior impulse as an "evil spirit" and he experienced God by "going against" the desolate impulse.¹⁴ In this way he was able to find God in all things by carefully discerning all his interior experiences ("spirits"). Thus discernment of spirits became a daily very practical living of the art of loving God with his whole heart, whole body, and whole strength. Every moment of life was loving (finding) God in the existential situation in a deep quiet, peace, and joy.

For Ignatius, this finding God in the present interior movement, feeling, or option was almost instantaneous in his mature years because the central "feel" or "bent" of his being had so been grasped by God. For the beginner, what was almost instantaneous for the mature Ignatius may require the effort of a prayerful process of a few hours or days depending on the importance of the movement-impulse to be discerned. In some of his writings, Ignatius uses *examen* to refer to this almost instantaneous test for congruence with his true self—something he could do a number of times every hour of the day. But he also speaks of *examen* in the formal restricted sense of two quarter-hour exercises of prayer a day.

The intimate and essential relationship between these two senses of *examen* has been the point of this whole booklet.



Jesuit Institute London

Excerpt from *Consciousness Examen* (1972)

by George Aschenbrenner SJ

¹³ John Futrell SJ, *Ignatian Discernment* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1970) p.64

¹⁴ cf. *Spiritual Exercises* n.319