

EXAMEN - HANDOUT

EXAMEN RESOURCE 1: REFLECTION ON THE EXAMEN

Michel Bacq, S.J

Ignatius' life was totally transformed when, on his recovery bed in Loyola, he became conscious that his desires gave rise to dissimilar feelings. His dream of conquering the heart of a great lady of Spanish nobility left him sad. While his dream of following Christ as St. Francis did, left him with a sense of lasting joy. He chose the lasting joy.¹

Ignatius did not choose celibacy as a disciple of Jesus because he thought it was better than marriage. It was not a matter of thinking, but of feeling. Ignatius chose what gave him a lasting joy. For many people, the deep longing for a successful couple, family and job would be a source of lasting joy.

My feelings reveal my desires. Lasting joy reveals my deep yearning for full life. This deep yearning is God's yearning for me. Jesus wants a full life for us (Jn 10:10) and complete joy (Jn 15:11). My deep yearning for life and joy is identical to God's call that draws me to Him (Jn 12:32).

This prime experience that Ignatius did about discernment was about his future. Desires are about future. Ignatius was asking himself, "What shall I do?" and not yet, "What have I done?" He discovered what to do before being converted. Ignatius was not concerned with whether what he intended to do was good or bad. His question, still unconscious at that time, was, "is it a source of deeper life?"

Examen is making conscious what is unconscious. It's a time when I stop to ask myself, "Am I joyful? Am I alive?" If not, "What is bothering me?" I can do a short examen at any time. For example during a conversation, during a meeting, or alone in a quiet place.

"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" (George Aschenbrenner).

On his recovery bed in Loyola, what was Ignatius doing all the day long? He was reading narratives about Jesus' life, Jesus' disciples' lives, the saints' lives. Those lives ignited his heart. They were an attractive, source of life. Then he stopped reading. He took time to savor consciously this deep, new life springing within himself.

Only, during a second step, did Ignatius look back on his past life and become conscious that it was not congruent with his deep, newly discovered yearning. He was trapped by dreams of greatness, honors and prowess. Making frequent examens about his struggles against vainglory, he became able to formulate in his own words his deep yearning, his personal call: to contribute to the greater glory of God. Filled by grace, he became able to live according this motto.

It is possible that the wording "glory of God" does not awake in me a particular feeling or yearning. How would I formulate, in my own words, what ignites my heart?

Herbert Alfonso tells: « A Jesuit, a friend of me, who could no longer pray, asked my help. I said to him: "Have you ever felt spontaneously united to God? " "Of course, he replied, every time I see how good God has been for me". I asked him, "Have you ever prayed about the goodness of God? " "Never" he replied. I said: "Try". This Jesuit made the goodness of God the theme of his prayer, and prayer never left him. He had discovered his deep yearning: "To open himself to the goodness of God".²

What was the deep yearning of Francis of Assisi? "To be little and poor, like Jesus". And of St. Therese de Lisieux: "To be a child in the Father's arms". Charles de Foucauld wanted "to announce Jesus silently". And Christian de Chergé: "To be a prayerful Christian among prayerful Muslims"...

What freezes my heart?³ Examen is also about this question. I need to stop what I am doing in order to meet Jesus crossing my life - as Zacchaeus did. The ice in Zacchaeus' heart melted under the gaze of Jesus (Lk 19:1-10). Before his meeting with Jesus, Zacchaeus was probably not conscious that he, Zacchaeus, was generous. Surely he was not aware of his deep yearning.

Under the merciful gaze of Jesus I discover that I am a forgiven sinner. This is a source of deep joy and transformation. It was so for the disciples after the resurrection. "They were filled with joy at seeing the Lord (Jn 20:21)". Not only is Jesus alive, but He makes his disciples alive as well. As the prodigal son, they were dead, without any hope, and then, they are renewed, alive (Lk 15:32). The disciples of Emmaus said to themselves, "Did not our hearts burn within us as he talked to us on the road and explained the scriptures to us? (Lk 24:32)"

When I have succeeded to formulate, in my own words, my deep and true yearning (which corresponds to my personal vocation and my path of conversion), daily examen becomes easier. The question, "What gave me life during these last hours?" becomes "Was my deep yearning satisfied?" If yes, I take time to discover what concrete facts have nourished my deep yearning. I savor life and joy. I say thanks to the Lord for these facts.

If, during my daily examen, I feel sadness, anger, fear, tiredness, boredom, guilt, I also say thanks to the Lord! Because these feelings are precious indicators, like flashing lights on a control desk. They show that my deep yearning was not filled. I take time to discover what concrete fact has disconnected me from my deep yearning. I say thanks to the Lord for his light and his merciful love about the situation where I missed the goal. I ask him for the light I need for a better strategy next time in a similar situation.

1 - St. Ignatius of Loyola, Autobiography, n° 6-8. What Ignatius calls "consolation" (Spiritual Exercises 316)

2- in The Personal Vocation, Transformation in Depth through the Spiritual Exercises (CIS : Roma, 1990)

3 - what Ignatius calls "desolation" (Spiritual Exercises 317)

EXAMEN RESOURCE 2: BEGINNING TO DIG FOR THE TREASURE

Extract from *God of Surprises*. (pp.77-79) by Gerald W. Hughes

If it is true that God is at work in every detail of our lives, how do we begin to recognise his action and our reaction? One way is to practise daily the following exercise, called 'A Review of Consciousness'.

At the end of a day, especially before going to sleep, the mind, without any conscious effort on our part, tends to play back some of the events of the day so vividly that if the day has been particularly eventful we can find it difficult to get to sleep. We may find ourselves re-enacting a quarrel, thinking of the clever and cutting things we might have said if only we had been more quick-witted. The review of consciousness is based on this natural tendency of the mind. Before beginning any prayer, it is good to spend a few seconds reminding ourselves what we are about to do, then asking God that our whole being may be directed purely to his service and praise. It is a prayer that our life 'may be directed', and so we can make it although we may be very aware that, in fact, it is not so directed.

Having made this prayer, then let your mind drift over the day, refraining from any self-judgement, whether of approval or disapproval, attending to and relishing only those moments of the day for which you are grateful. Even the most harrowing day includes some good moments, if only we take the trouble to look – it might be the sight of a raindrop falling, or the fact that I can see at all. When people attempt this exercise, they are usually surprised at the number and variety of good moments in the day which, had they not deliberately recalled them, would have been quickly forgotten, obscured, perhaps, by any painful experience in the day. This daily review of consciousness is an exercise in 'the praise, reverence and service of God'. Having remembered the events for which you are grateful, thank and praise God for them.

After thanksgiving, the next step is to recall your inner moods and feelings, noting, if you can, what occasioned them, but again refraining from any self-judgement. Be with Christ as you look at these moods and beg him to show you the attitudes which underlie them. For your part, do not try to analyse the moods: just relive, in Christ's presence, the events which gave rise to them. Contemplate the events of the day and pray to Christ out of your experience of them. Sometimes, this can be very painful, for if we look at the scene and refrain from judging, the facts can begin to judge us and we can begin to see with clarity our own refusal to understand, listen, be compassionate and treat the other person, or persons, with love. Because they would not take their place in our kingdom of values, praising, reverencing and serving us and our ideas, we rejected them. The important thing is not to analyse our experience, but to contemplate it in Christ's presence and let him show us where we have let him be in us and where we have refused to let him be. Thank him for the times we have 'let his glory through' and beg his forgiveness for the times we have reused him entry. He never refuses forgiveness. He knows our weakness far better than we do. All that we have to do is show it to him and he can transform our weakness into strength.

Finally, look briefly at the day ahead and beg him to be with us in every detail of it. The whole exercise should not take more than fifteen minutes, but it is a most valuable fifteen minutes and, if practiced daily, we become more sensitive to his action in our lives not only at the time of the exercise, but also in the middle of our activities. Do not expect miracles in the first week, or even in the first month, but the effects will become apparent. We shall find that he is making us more able to love, to experience a joy welling up within us, often unexpectedly. We shall become less agitated and more peaceful, less hurried and more content to wait, less suspicious and more ready to trust, able to find interest and delight in people who used to make us bristle, less fearful of what others may think of us and more free to be ourselves, kinder to others and to ourselves and less likely to fly off the handle.

EXAMEN RESOURCE 3

The Examen of Apostolic Consciousness for Reflective Leaders (Loyola Institute)

1. This is best done before you retire, or at the end of the work you are finishing for the day.
2. In the first column, you write down what happened. At times you might write down things as they went along. At other times you might hit just the big things. Sometimes you might just take a single incident and squeeze the meaning out of it.
3. In the second column, write down the emotions, convictions, feelings, desires, attitudes that went along with what happened.
4. In the third column – it is the smallest for a reason – write down one thing that you are going to do the next day. It must be something that can indeed do – not, for instance, “I’ll be great”, but something more like, “I’m going to be cheerful at the meeting”, or “I will go out of my way to speak to a student with whom I’m struggling”.
5. You will find good in reviewing what you have written, weekly perhaps, or periodically.
6. This seems best done in a little notebook, which only you will see. You might tear them up once you have filled them up, reviewed them, or prayed with them as much as you find helpful. Try to look for patterns. How did God seem present or absent?

Experience (what happened today)	Reaction	Action

EXAMEN RESOURCE 4: IGNATIAN EXAMEN OF CONSCIOUSNESS WITH RED SEAL

St. Ignatius of Loyola founded a religious order that was intended for action in the world, not cloistered life behind monastery walls. At the same time, his experience of discovering the Divine presence in all things depended on practicing contemplation, even in the midst of action.

As a way of fostering this habit of reflection or mindfulness, he encouraged a daily practice that involves the review of one's experiences and actions. This is the Examen.

Not intended to take more than 15 minutes, the Examen is a method for taking stock of what experiences we're grateful for, as well as of regret or experiences we wish to learn from.

Regular practice of the Examen deepens our interior freedom from attachments, expands our self-awareness, and helps us become more active and discerning partners with God in the evolving labor of creation. It involves just a few steps and is useful at the end of the day.

1. I take a comfortable, yet alert posture and become present to myself, closing my eyes, paying attention to my breath, aware of the gift and blessing of my life at this moment. I recall that I am in the Divine Presence, and turn my mind and my heart toward God.
2. I begin a review of the day from the time I woke up to the time of this reflection, pausing to savor with appreciation and gratitude all those moments for which I am thankful.
3. Next, I become mindful of whatever spiritual gift or grace I need at this moment, and make a petition to God for this grace, confident that it is the Spirit moving me to do so and that the gift is given the moment the petition is expressed.
4. I then bring some intention to exploring the moments that I may regret, or feel ungrateful for, or that may have left me angry, sad, impatient, etc. The intention I bring is the willingness to learn from these moments, and that through my growth in self-awareness, that I might also grow in inner freedom from attachments, shadows, or other obstacles to love, creativity, or fruitfulness. With a spirit of humility, mercy, and patience with myself, I review those moments and draw fruit, learning, and insight from them.
5. Looking toward tomorrow, I make some practical resolutions to how I might proceed differently if needed, rehearsing how I might adapt my actions, my attitudes, and even my intentions if necessary in order to live in greater harmony with God's will. I express sorrow for whatever I might regret, and gratitude for this chance to draw insight, wisdom, and grace from my experience today. Close with an Our Father.

EXAMEN RESOURCE 5: THE AWARENESS EXAMEN

Gerald Coleman, S.J

This is a prayer which helps us to become more aware of God's presence in our day. During it we reflect upon our experiences of the day, and ask for the Grace to be able to recognise God in them. This prayer can become a central element in the life of a busy person, helping us to find God in our ordinary activities. It has FIVE points or areas for reflection.

Thanksgiving

At each moment of our day, our God is giving us gifts. As we look over the day we seek to appreciate all the good things that have happened to us and to thank God for these. We recall the joyful moments, the beauty of creation, and pray to see all these as gifts from God. We may simply take one special event of our day and remember the happy feelings we had and express our thanks to God.

Asking for Insight

We now pray for the gift of the Holy Spirit to help us understand ourselves better. We ask for the wisdom to see ourselves more clearly. Why do we act the way we do? Is it from selfishness? Pride? Fear? Confusion? Tiredness? Frustration? Love? Generosity? A deep desire to be helpful to others? How have we felt today? What is the source of those feelings?

Looking at My Day

Today and each day, God is calling us to share peace and love with others. We not ask ourselves how we have spent our day. As we ponder our behaviour today, we begin to see patterns and connections, which open our eyes to our own weakness and self-centredness. Looking back over our day, we come to realise the contrast between His goodness and our failures in love.

We Ask Forgiveness

Seeing the inadequacy of our response to God, we now turn to Christ on the Cross, we admit our sinfulness and ask forgiveness. Whilst this is a moment of sorrow, it is also one of wonder and gratitude at His love, and of desire to do something for Him.

Looking to Tomorrow

Finally, as we look to tomorrow, we ask for God's grace and help. We ask to touch particularly those areas, which have come into focus during our prayer. Are there some attitudes in us that we would like Him to change? Are there some decisions we need to make? Would we like to be more sensitive to God's presence in our day? Ask for what you need.