

Putting God First: An Introduction to Consciousness Examen

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Following Christ today has become more difficult and challenging than ever. For one, modern media endlessly bombard people with secular philosophies and values which, for Christians, compete against their loyalty to Christ and contradict their own Christian convictions and ideals. Further, advancements in technology have led some people to obsession with computers, cell phones, and other high-tech gadgets. All these and other forms of modern attachments to the world and its values divert Christians' attention from God, leading them to depersonalization, disintegration, and more imbalanced Christian lives. Without a solid and holistic spirituality today, it is so easy to get distracted, to succumb to the values of the world, and drift farther away from God.

The aim of this modest article is to introduce and recommend a spiritual practice or discipline which can help a Christian put God first in his/her own life and sustain his/her relationship with Christ in this complex world plagued by consumerism, materialism and hedonism. This spiritual discipline, one of the many spiritual disciplines in the Christian tradition, is popularly known today as *Consciousness Examen*.

What is Consciousness Examen?

As used in Catholic spirituality and religious circles today, the word "examen" is short name for "consciousness examen," a spiritual discipline or exercise of reviewing, discerning, and responding actively to God's loving presence, influence, and direction in one's day-to-day life. This spiritual exercise has undergone a long historical development. In

fact, examen has its roots in human being's natural tendency for self-reflection or self-examination and as such is as old as humanity itself. As a spiritual exercise, examen is based on the biblical themes and practices of "remembrance" and "thanksgiving" of God's loving works, widely practiced and promoted by the ancient Stoic philosophers, Zen masters, desert monks, monastics, mystics, and Fathers of the Church. In the sixteenth century, it was revived and developed by St. Ignatius of Loyola into a 5-point format or method, reinterpreted by George Aschenbrenner in 1972 as *consciousness examen*¹ (consciousness of God's loving presence) rather than *examination of conscience* (moralistic accounting of one's sins), and is further refined and tailored to address some important spiritual needs by some authors today particularly by Joseph Tetlow.² The two fundamental theological principles behind the practice and spirituality of examen are: 1) God is present and active in all things³, 2) and so God can be found and loved in and through all things.⁴

Consciousness examen is closely linked with, and distinguished from, the ancient and still existing Christian practice known as "examination of conscience." Thus, "examen," "conscience," and "consciousness" are key terms that need to be clarified and distinguished at the outset. To do this, I will briefly analyze the etymology of these three words, and provide operational definitions and distinctions between the two closely related spiritual exercises of "examination of conscience" and "examination of consciousness."

The word 'examen' or 'examination' is taken from the Latin verb *examinare* which means "to test or try,"⁵ and the Latin noun *examen* which is "a means of weighing or testing."⁶ This noun (examen) in turn

¹ George Aschenbrenner, S.J., "Consciousness Examen," *Review for Religious* 31 (1972), 14.

² For Joseph Tetlow's articles on examen, cf. "The Examen of Particulars," *Review for Religious* 56 (1997): 230-250; "Examen: Persons in Relationships," *Review for Religious* 61 (2002): 118-136.

³ This theological principle is known in Catholic theology as the "principle of sacramentality."

⁴ This is also called as the "principle of mediation."

⁵ *Online Etymology Dictionary*, 2003 ed., s.v. "Examine" (online dictionary); available from <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=examine>; Internet; accessed 21 February 2004.

⁶ *Ibid.*

comes from the Latin verb *exigere* which means “tongue of a balance,”⁷ or “weight indicator on a balance scale,” or simply to “weigh accurately.”⁸ Therefore etymologically, examen “conveys the idea of an accurate assessment of the true situation.”⁹

This examen or getting an accurate assessment of a true situation is, unquestionably, a necessary part of human life and endeavor. Through it, a person is able to determine and monitor his/her strengths and weaknesses, assess his/her progress or regress in any endeavor, and provide appropriate measures to ensure his/her growth and correct any weakness or deterioration in his/her life. This is the reason why societies and institutions have all sorts of examinations or tests in various fields of human life like academic examinations, physical examinations, and psychological tests or examinations. To enhance one’s spiritual growth, a Christian needs also a sort of “spiritual examination” and this is precisely the basic purpose and rationale behind the practice of examen.

What about the word “conscience?” What does “conscience” in the term “examination of conscience” signify?

The word “conscience” comes from the Latin word *conscientia* which means “knowledge within oneself, a moral sense.”¹⁰ As a complex reality, conscience is oftentimes associated with morality of one’s actions. It is a judgment of reason whereby the human person recognizes the moral quality of a concrete act that he is going to perform, is in the process of performing, or has already completed.¹¹ In this light, the practice of examination of conscience would mean an assessment or “a review of one’s past thoughts, words and actions for the purpose of ascertaining their conformity with, or difformity from, the moral law.”¹² It is one of the earliest spiritual disciplines of Christianity which still survives to this day. Catholics usually do this exercise immediately before going to confession. Otherwise, it is done on a more regular basis as a devotional practice. Traditionally, this examination of conscience

⁷ Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed., s.v. “Examen.”

⁸ Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “Examine.”

⁹ Richard J. Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart’s True Home* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), 27.

¹⁰ Online Etymology Dictionary, 2003 ed., s.v. “Conscience.”

¹¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1778.

¹² Charles Coppens, “Examination of Conscience,” in *The Catholic Encyclopedia Online*, 2005 ed. (encyclopedia on-line); available from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05675a.htm>; Internet; accessed 13 May 2003.

emphasizes the morality of one's thoughts, words, and actions with special attention given to the quantity and gravity of one's sins. This view reflects the pre-Vatican II type of morality then which was overly legalistic and gave excessive importance on awareness and avoidance of sins.

The word "consciousness," on the other hand, is derived from the Latin *consciūs* which means "knowing" or "aware." Strictly speaking, consciousness cannot be defined because of its complexity as a word. In its widest sense, it includes all the sensations, thoughts, feelings, and volitions – in fact the sum total of a person's mental life.¹³ It is broader and wider in scope than the term conscience. This is the reason why the Jesuit scholar George Aschenbrenner prefers to use the term "consciousness examen" rather than "examination of conscience" and makes a clear distinction between the two. He argues that a more helpful and relevant way of doing the examen today is not so much on assessing the morality of one's actions (or what is called as examination of conscience) but as Aschenbrenner accurately puts it, on "how the Lord is affecting and moving us (often quite spontaneously!) deep in our own affective consciousness."¹⁴ Its special emphasis therefore is on discernment of God's influence in one's everyday life rather than moralistic accounting of one's sins. He calls this God-awareness exercise as "consciousness examen" rather than "examination of conscience" and thus introduces a new paradigm shift in understanding and doing the examen.

Aschenbrenner's choice of the word "consciousness" over the word "conscience" is not altogether new and surprising. In recent decades, spiritual writers have discovered that *conscience* in Romance languages like French (*conscience*) and Spanish (*consciencia*) means more than the English word "conscience," in the sense of moral awareness and judgment: it also means "consciousness."¹⁵ This insight is also supported by the fact that the Latin *conscientia* is a present participle and derivative of *conscire*¹⁶ which is also the Latin root of the English word "consciousness." One standard dictionary in fact

¹³ Michael Maher, "Consciousness," in *The Catholic Encyclopedia Online*, 2005 ed.

¹⁴ Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen," 14.

¹⁵ Dennis Hamm, S.J., "Rummaging for God: Praying Backward Through Your Day," *America*, (home page on-line); available from <http://www.georgetown.edu/centers/woodstock/wbc/wbc-formapp.htm>; Internet; accessed 15 May 2003.

¹⁶ "Be mutually aware" in English. From *com-* "with" + *scire* "to know." Conscience is a literal translation of the Greek *syneidesis*.

gives the archaic definition of conscience as “consciousness.”¹⁷ In view of this, consciousness examen simply recovers the original meaning of the traditional practice of examination of conscience and provides Christians a fuller appreciation of its significance and relevance in their lives today.

If one compares Aschenbrenner’s consciousness examen to the traditional way of doing the examination of conscience, one can notice that the former articulates a broader and wider perspective of the spiritual life – that spirituality goes beyond meticulous accounting of one’s sins but primarily seeking to find and love God in all the things that one does and the events that unfold in his/her day-to-day life.

Another way of expressing the merit of this new approach is that “prayer that deals with the full contents of your *consciousness* lets you cast your net much more broadly than prayer that limits itself to the contents of *conscience*, or moral awareness.”¹⁸

Kinds of Examen

To get a broader and deeper perspective on the subject at hand, let me distinguish three kinds of examen. The first kind of examen is what could be called *penitential* or *sacramental examen*. This type of examination prepares an individual to receive the sacraments, particularly the sacrament of reconciliation and the Eucharist. This is the examination of conscience that Catholics do before confessing their sins to a priest. This penitential examination is a necessary part of what one may call ‘contrition’, “by which we consider, judge and arrange our life according to the holiness and love of God...The genuineness of penance depends on this heartfelt contrition. For conversion should affect a person from within toward a progressively deeper enlightenment and ever-closer likeness to Christ.”¹⁹ Such is the role and significance of the first type of examen in a Christian’s spiritual life.

The second type of examination of conscience is known as the *devotional examination of conscience*. This kind of examination is called devotional because it is done on a daily basis, apart from participating in the sacraments. More than a reflection upon one’s day, it is often

¹⁷ Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, 10th ed., s.v. “Conscience.”

¹⁸ Hamm, “Rummaging for God.”

¹⁹ *Rite of Penance*, 6a. An on-line copy of this rite can be downloaded from *Catholic Liturgical Library* (website); available from <http://www.catholicliturgy.com/texts/penanceintro.txt>; Internet; accessed 16 August 2005.

used as a form of meditative prayer. This devotional examen has two sub-types: 1) the general examination of conscience and 2) the particular examination of conscience.

The *general examination of conscience* is the discipline of mentally reviewing God's presence in one's thoughts, words, and actions during the day. It is called "general" because the review is directed to "all" the actions, experiences, or consciousness of God during the day. There are many ways and variations of doing it, although the still most popular method is the 5-point format as suggested by St. Ignatius of Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*. This exercise is done everyday usually before one goes to sleep at night.

In contrast, the *particular examen* is the daily habit of identifying one's predominant weakness and carrying out a strategy to overcome this vice and replace it with an appropriate virtue. This examen is called "particular" because it focuses its review to one specific or "one special point, a fault to be corrected, a virtue to be cultivated."²⁰ As a help, one can tabulate the frequency of successes or failures in a little book or journal. This examen is usually made early in the morning, or before lunch or dinner.

The difference between these two subtypes of examen lies in their basic matter and specific purpose. The basic matter for particular examen is one's major sins and defects, including especially the root cause of these sins and defects. Its main purpose is to allow the individual to plainly see, amend, and correct his disordered tendencies and appetites.²¹ The *general examen* is far more extensive than the particular examen. The concern of general examen goes beyond repentance of one's sins and failures, taking into consideration other aspects of the spiritual life like daily gratitude for God's goodness, enlightenment and guidance from the Holy Spirit, renewal of one's love and commitment to Christ, discernment, and making concrete resolutions and strategies to be more like Christ. The general examen therefore surpasses the particular examen as a method of prayer because it is basically designed at cultivating a discerning heart.²²

²⁰ Adolph Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, 2nd and revised edition; translated by Herman Branderis (Tournai: Desclée & Co., 1948), 227.

²¹ Ramon Ma. Bautista S.J., *Hearts Burning: The Consciousness Examen as an Authentic Ignatian Formation in Discerning Love* (Makati: Bookmark, 1990), 39.

²² *Ibid.*, 40.

'Consciousness examen' is the new and more fitting term used today for and instead of the 'general examination of conscience.' According to Adolph Tanquerey, both the general and particular examens can be done or joined together as a prayer exercise. In doing this, the examen-er will "limit the general examination to a summary glance over the day's actions in order to discover the chief faults, passing directly on to the particular examination which is more important."²³

There is still a third type of examen, known as *special examen*. This type of examen is closely connected with the two devotional examens. It is

...best made on the monthly day of recollection and during the annual retreat. Its purpose is to get at the causes – be they moral or psychological – of our sins and defects. Special effort must be made to discover our characteristic moral 'fiber'; our most pronounced qualities and natural virtues. Similarly we try to trace the genesis of our acquired tendencies, both good and bad with a view to preparing the strategy that will enhance the one and oppose the other.²⁴

All these types of examen, though distinct in its format and goals, are closely interconnected, interdependent and mutually inclusive within the Christian's total spiritual program. For example, the fruitfulness of sacramental examen depends greatly on how one does regularly the consciousness examen. Through the daily realization and appreciation of one's giftedness that leads to ever deepening familiarity with God's ways, gradual nurturing of virtues and pruning of one's evil tendencies, the consciousness examen gives solid foundation and direction to one's sacramental examen and facilitates true conversion and reconciliation with God. Consciousness examen in turn cannot bring about closer intimacy effective healing of one's sinfulness and growth in practicing of virtues if it is not supplemented every now and then by a sacramental examen through which one receives the grace of God's love and forgiveness.

²³ Tanquerey, *The Spiritual Life*, 227.

²⁴ Fr. Bruno Cocuzzi, O.C.D., "The Examination of Conscience," *Brookline*, (February 19, 1961); (home page online); available from <http://webpages.charter.net/fr.bruno/Cogitatio%20Sancta/Cogitatio%20Sancta%20-%2033%20Examination%20of%20Conscience.htm>; Internet; accessed 27 September 2003.

How to Do the Examen

There are actually different ways of doing the examen today although many examen practitioners usually follow the 5-point method of doing the examen suggested by St. Ignatius' in his writing, *Spiritual Exercises*. It is the most popular method today not only because it is systematic and easy to follow but also because it has already helped many others deepen their spiritual life, notwithstanding the many spiritual masters, directors and authors who wrote about and recommended the said format of examen. But considering the fact that there are a growing number of people who are doing the examen, and that these people have different spiritual styles and approaches, needs and circumstances, there is eventually a need to adapt the five-point format and in fact tailor-fit it for people of various ages, social status, jobs, lifestyles, cultures, levels of spirituality, and other personal circumstances.

Individual Examen

For beginners, it is usually recommended that they first try the 5-point method and feel free to use variations later on according to their own discretion. The following are the five points of the general examen based on the *Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius:

- 1) *Give Thanks*. The first point is to give thanks to God our Lord for the gifts received;
- 2) *Pray for Light*. The second point is to ask for the grace to know my sins and to root them out;
- 3) *Examen your Experiences and Actions*. The third point is to demand an account of my soul from the moment of rising to that of the present examination, hour by hour or period by period. The thoughts should be examined first, then the words, and finally the actions;
- 4) *Express Sorrow*. The fourth point is to ask pardon of God our Lord for my faults;
- 5) *Resolve to Become and Do Better*. The fifth point is to resolve to amend with the help of God's grace. Close with an *Our Father*.²⁵

Each step or point of the examen should not be taken as completely distinct and separate from the other steps. The five steps

²⁵ Louis Puhl S.J. (trans.), *Spiritual Exercises* (Makati: St Paul, 1990), 32.

are interconnected and they do overlap. They form as a whole and are intended to be a more helpful exercise if undertaken in the proper order of steps, that is, from the first step of giving thanks until the fifth and last step of resolving to do better. One is free of course to dwell only on any one or two of these steps depending again on the need and purpose of the person praying or doing the examen, whom this author will designate as the 'examen-er' from time to time.

For easy recall of the order of the above 5 steps or points, some authors and spiritual directors suggest that examen-ers use an acronym for the five steps. For example, one convenient acronym that can be used for the five steps is the word "GLEAN."²⁶ These five letters stand for the first letter of each step. **G** stands for *gratitude* or thanksgiving as the first step. **L** stands for *light* or asking the Holy Spirit for enlightenment as the second step; **E** stands for *examination* or review of one's thought, words, and actions during the day and serves as the third step. **A** stands for *act of sorrow* or repentance of one's sins as the fourth step. **N** stands for *never* or the resolution not to commit sin again and to do better next time which is the fifth step of the examen.

The word "glean" literally means to "gather," "collect" or "extract." To easily correlate examen with the word "glean," one simply needs to remember that examen is to gather or collect one's experiences of the day and to see how God was present and active throughout one's day.

For a shorter and simpler method of doing the examen, this researcher highly recommends the "2-question" method as proposed and developed by Dennis, Sheila and Matthew Linn in their book entitled, "Sleeping with Bread."²⁷

Family, Group, or Community Examen

Authors Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn have highly recommended using the examen as a form of family or communal prayer. They offered the following two questions as a simple format or guide for doing and sharing the examen as a family, group, or community:

²⁶ This acronym was first taught and introduced to this writer about twelve years ago by his former spiritual director, Fr. Roque Ferriols, S.J who presently teaches philosophy at Ateneo de Manila University and is one of the spiritual directors at San Jose Seminary, Ateneo campus, Quezon City.

²⁷ See Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1995), 5-9.

"What was your best part of the day?"

"What was your worst part of the day?"

Alternative questions are:

What did you feel good about today?

What was your biggest struggle today, or when did you feel sad, helpless or angry?²⁸

Spiritual Dynamics of the Five Points of Examen

Let us now briefly go through the five points or steps of examen. Since there are many interpretations available today to this method of doing the examen, he offers the following interpretation as one synthesis of the various interpretations of the meaning and relevance of the five-point examen to the spiritual life of a Christian.

1. *Gratitude*

One begins the examen by thanking the Lord for all the gifts and blessings he/she receives from God.

This act of general thanksgiving for God's goodness sets the overall disposition of the whole prayer of examen. Thanksgiving is the most natural and spontaneous positive response one can make to a generous person. In the same manner, the best way to approach an all-loving and generous God is through a grateful heart.²⁹

This first point of examen precisely aims to instill in the examen-er a grateful disposition for God. It teaches him/her to constantly acknowledge God's unconditional love and all his bountiful blessings. Thus, its basic spirit is to enable the examen-er to see that all is gift from God. Its main goal is to increasingly see and experience in prayer one's "giftedness" by God, that one is unconditionally loved by God. This experience of unconditional love by God is crucial for a Christian because it liberates him/her from all fears, insecurities, and attachments. This ultimately leads the person to be selfless, indifferent to and detached from all other things so that he/she becomes truly free to commit himself/herself to love and serve God and others.

²⁸ To learn more about these two questions and how they can be applied in a communal examen, see *ibid.*, 25-27.

²⁹ Psalm 95:2.

In thanking and cherishing God's goodness, one must avoid the tendency to acknowledge and desire only the specific gifts provided by God. Instead, the focus of one's daily thanksgiving must be the Giver himself – God's love and his generosity – and should go beyond thanking for the specific gifts and blessings which, though helpful, are just signs and sacraments of God's love.

In this sense, this first point of examen serves as a constant reminder that God is first and the most important person in one's life – that He is the absolute value and the greatest treasure – while all other things are relative and important only to the extent that they help a person attain God as the ultimate value. Indeed, thanking God always is the most basic and simplest spiritual exercise for putting God first in one's own life.

2. Enlightenment from the Holy Spirit

After thanking God for the gifts and graces received, the examen-er now begs the Holy Spirit for the grace of enlightenment to guide him / her in doing the prayer of examen.

Recognizing that God himself is the "chief examiner," the person now begs for the Holy Spirit for the grace of seeing oneself as God sees him/her. This means that in reality, examen is a joint search by God and the self: "If the examination is solely a *self*-examination, we will always end up with excessive praise or blame. But under the search light of the great Physician we can expect only good always."³⁰

In this second point, the examen-er "begs" for grace. Begging is a good gesture here because begging requires a true act of humility for the person begging – an acknowledgment of his/her total dependence, surrender, and trust for God. This humble prayer is not just to see God and self more clearly, but to love him dearly and follow him more closely.

This part of the examen stresses the importance and role of the Holy Spirit and grace in one's spiritual life – that one's prayers and whole life in fact should always be motivated, guided, and inspired by the Spirit of love of the Father and the Son.

³⁰ Foster, *Prayer: Finding the Heart's True Home*, 29-30.

3. Review of the Day

After thanking God for all His goodness and invoking the guidance of His Spirit, the examen-er now reviews his / her day and discerns how he / she was drawn and influenced by God's Spirit. He / she also notices how he / she responded or failed to respond to the promptings of the Spirit throughout the day and imitated Jesus in his / her thoughts, words, and actions.

This is the central and most unique element in the prayer of examen. Since God's loving presence is active in all things, the examen-er must make an effort to be always conscious of this loving presence by reviewing the events and activities of one's day. God's presence is especially at work deep down in the affective consciousness of a person where he deeply moves him/her. In this light, Fr. Jordan Aumann recommends that one's examination or awareness should focus not so much on one's specific acts but on one's predominant habit or disposition of the soul throughout the day.³¹ If one puts so much emphasis on investigating one's specific actions, there is a tendency to get lost in trivial matters and end up in self-centered appraisal of one's strengths and virtues and/or scrupulous accounting of one's sins and failures.

But how can the examen-er diagnose the predominant disposition of his/her soul? What indicators a person can make use to discern the presence of God in the deepest recesses of his/her heart?

For some teachers and masters of Catholic spirituality, these indicators are the "interior moods or feelings," technically called in Catholic spiritual tradition as the "consolations" and "desolations" of both a person's formal prayer periods and actual Christian life. Fr. Aschenbrenner expounds:

It is here in the depths of our affectivity, so spontaneous, strong, and shadowy at times that God moves us and deals with us most intimately. These interior moods, feelings, urges, and movements are the "spirits" that must be sifted out, discerned, so we can recognize the Lord's call to us at this intimate core of our being.... The examen is a chief means to this discerning of our interior consciousness.³²

³¹ Jordan Aumann, *Spiritual Theology* (Manila: University of Santo Tomas, 1982), 360.

³² Aschenbrenner, *Consciousness Examen*, 17-18.

These interior moods or feelings, considered as the raw materials of one's experiences of God or discernment of God's will³³, are the primary focus of this third point of examen. It is through these interior movements of one's heart that the examen-er is able to find God's presence or the influence of the enemy of God during the day.

One convenient and practical way for identifying these interior feelings and movements is by asking two questions³⁴ daily: 1) For what moment today I am most grateful?; 2) For what moment today I am least grateful?³⁵ These two simple and seemingly innocent questions compel the examen-er to capture and directly engage the interior movements of the spirits at work in himself/herself during the day: 1) the consolation (most grateful) and 2) desolation (least grateful) experiences of his/her day.

Answering these two questions and identifying the peak and lowest moment of one's day does not come automatically. Hence, the examen-er recalls and replays, as in a movie, the places he/she has been in, the activities³⁶ he/she undertook, and the people he/she was with throughout the day,³⁷ mindful of the interior feelings or movements triggered by remembrance of these places, activities, and peoples.

³³ Thomas Green, S.J., *Weeds Among the Wheat. Discernment: Where Prayer and Action Meet* (Makati: St. Paul Publications, 1984), 99.

³⁴ These 2 questions are introduced by Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn and Matthew Linn in their wonderful book on examen, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1995), 6. They also offer the following pairs of questions as alternative ways of asking the same 2 questions above: 1) When did I give and receive most love today? 2) When did I give and receive the least love today?; 1) When did I feel most alive today? 2) When did I most feel life draining out of me?; 1) When today did I have the greatest sense of belonging to myself, others, God and the universe? 2) When did I have the least sense of belonging?; 1) When was I happiest today? 2) When was I saddest?; 1) What was today's high point? 2) What was today's low point?

³⁵ Again, this is only one among many ways and methods of identifying the peak or lowest moments of one's day. This writer chooses and highly recommends this simple 2-question format for beginners in the daily practice of examen.

³⁶ These "activities" usually take the form of 1) thoughts, 2) words, and 3) actions which, according to the original instruction of St. Ignatius, the examen-er should review in this proper order in the third point of examen. It is under the review of these activities that one can integrate St. Ignatius' method of doing the examen.

³⁷ See David K. Townsend, "The Examen: Re-examined," *Centrum Ignatianum Spiritualitatis* 18 (1987): 60.

In this process of playing back one's day, the examen-er is now able to get in touch with his/her "most grateful" moment or moments of the day. These most grateful or peak moments (consolations) usually refer to his/her positive experiences brought about by certain situations or events that unfold during the day. For example, he/she is most thankful for sleeping soundly the previous night; for the warm phone conversation with a friend not seen and heard for a long time; for an encouraging compliment from a colleague in the office; for making a street child very happy by buying her food; for a hearty dinner with one's parents, and other heart-warming and uplifting experiences. The examen-er takes time to reminisce these peak moments and thank God profusely for all of them. He/she also spends time to discern what God is trying to tell him/her through these "most grateful" moments.³⁸

After reviewing the consolations, the examen-er proceeds to recall the "least grateful" moment or moments of the day. These lowest moments (desolations) are oftentimes associated with negative experiences, situations or events. Examples of these are when one is least thankful for the heavy traffic on his/her way to the office; for the news of a bombing incident that killed some innocent lives; for having lost an important file in the office; for a brother who got sick and confined in a hospital, and other unpleasant incidents. The examen-er takes time to name, acknowledge these undesirable events and even thank God for them.³⁹ Then, he allots sufficient time to hear what God is trying to tell him/her through these negative experiences.⁴⁰

As one can notice, these consolation and desolation moments serve as: 1) the context or *locus* of the examen-er's intimate encounter with God, and 2) the object or means of his/her discernment of God's will. Constant and regular practice of examen will gradually enable the examen-er to be more open to and familiar with the ways of God's Spirit,

³⁸ Discerning consolations is quite tricky. For rules on how to consolations properly, see Green, *Weeds Among the Wheat*, 125 ff.

³⁹ Consistent with the first point of thanking God always for all the good things and bad, the examen-er at this point is radically challenged to be grateful even for the painful memories and other undesirable events that happened during the day. He/she is reminded that indeed, all is gift from God. Even if he/she sees no good point for a certain event to happen, he/she has to surrender this unwanted experience, including his/her pains, doubts and fears to the Lord and put his/her faith and trust on Him. Accordingly, this is the most difficult and challenging part of the examen.

⁴⁰ For rules on desolation, see Green, *Weeds among the Wheat*, 143 ff.

and to grow in deeper intimacy with God and clearer understanding of God's direction for his/her life.

4. Contrition for Sin and Gratitude for Good Works

After reviewing and relishing God's loving presence and action throughout the day, the examen-er now devotes his / her time to be sorry for his / her sins against an all-loving and compassionate God.

This is the point of examen where one has to come to terms with one's weaknesses and confront one's sins. First of all, sin is a reality which must always be viewed in the context of God's love. Otherwise, this part of examen easily degenerates into a neurotic habit of exaggerating one's guilt and blame in sin which only leads the person to scrupulosity, desperation and hopelessness. One must always remember this basic truth: God himself and his love is the impetus, central focus, and final direction of one's genuine sorrow for sins. Based on this basic fact, sin is the anti-thesis of God's love.⁴¹ Thus the more the person is penetrated and consumed by God's love, the more he/she becomes aware of his/her sins and impurities. As the examen-er becomes overwhelmed by God's love, he/she realizes how he/she terribly falls short in responding to this pure love and eventually acknowledges his/her sinfulness, "I have sinned against the Lord!"⁴² Thus, sin is a person's deliberate rejection of God who constantly offers his undying love and compassion for him/her. Sin is a denial that all is God's gift, including the self. It is an act of ingratitude to the Father whose deepest nature is love. So when one desires to be truly sorry for one's sins, emphasis should be given not so much on "I have sinned" but on "against the Lord!," the all-loving and merciful Father who alone deserves one's greatest love, fidelity, and gratitude.

Aside from examining and repenting of one's weaknesses or acts of ingratitude to God, it is also helpful, at this point of the examen, to take some time to affirm one's self and give thanks to God for the good works one has done and virtues one has consistently practiced during the day. For this writer, this is a more balanced and helpful approach in doing this fourth step of examen.

⁴¹ Sin and selfishness and impurity are antithetical to perfect love. See James C. Pauley, "Answering Life's Most Significant Question: Why Do We Exist?," *Catholic.net* (home page article); available from: <http://www.catholic.net/rcc/Periodicals/Faith/7-8-98/PHILOSOPHY.html>; Internet; accessed 20 February 2005.

⁴² 2 Sam 12:13.

5. Resolution

The examen-er concludes his/her prayer of examen by making appropriate resolutions and carrying out concrete steps to be more like Christ.

This is a proper way to end the prayer of examen. It is a follow-up of the objective of the fourth step which is gradual conversion from one's sinfulness and affirming one's practice of virtues. It urges the examen-er to come up with a firm and concrete resolve to be more like Christ, to love and serve Him in others. For this purpose, one common strategy used not only in the spiritual life but also in other areas of life is to maximize one's greatest strength or virtue and minimize one's greatest weakness or vice.⁴³ This is of course easily said than done. For this reason, any strategy for cultivation of virtues and pruning of vices must be translated to concrete and realistic plans of action and regularly follow up these plans until these are fully accomplished.

This fifth step also serves as a link between prayer and actual Christian living. It directs the examen-er to be more proactive in seizing opportunities for loving and serving Christ, be prepared to face challenges, and vigilant of threats against one's relationship with God. It also motivates the person to look forward to the next period of examen where one again seizes the opportunity to review what have transpired since the last examen, deepen one's awareness and gratitude of God's love, and strengthen one's commitment to love and serve God in all things. In summary, examen is a continuous, ongoing spiral process of deepening one's relationship with Jesus. It is a constant alternation of coming to Christ in prayer and going to where Christ leads a person to, from discipleship to apostleship, from communion to mission.

Place, Time, and Duration

In doing the individual examen, one simply needs to settle down in a convenient and conducive place for prayer, usually in a secluded

⁴³ This tried and tested strategy, which is a product of long centuries of moral wisdom, follows the old maxim of "Divide and conquer." This means that for a person to grow more in the likeness of Christ, one has to conquer one's vices one at a time, starting from the most serious vice to the least serious, and gradually replace the specific vice by practicing its corresponding virtue. The converse is also helpful. One's greatest virtue and other virtues must also be constantly checked, sustained and further strengthened so that one's Christian life will continuously be buoyed up by these virtues and not be overturned by one's vices.

and quiet place. This is the ideal place of prayer. But this does not mean doing the examen *always* in a solitary or remote place. Saints and spiritual masters have time and time again exhorted Christians to pray always, whenever and wherever one finds himself/herself. In fact, the spirituality of examen urges everyone to always see and find God in all things and all things in God.⁴⁴ That's why the examen can be performed (and should be performed if opportunity allows) almost everywhere – inside the church or chapel, on the beach, in a car, in the office, at home, in the library.

One positive feature of examen is that it is a simple and handy prayer exercise. It can be performed without the use of any religious object or paraphernalia like the bible, crucifix, candles, beads, incense, and others. One of course can opt to use religious objects, music or any other effects as means to set the mood for prayer of examen. But again, these things are not really essential and should be used only if it helps the individual dispose him/herself to pray the examen.

Praying the examen takes about five to fifteen minutes depending on the goal, need and circumstance of the examen-er. It can be performed once or twice a day or as opportunity allows or need arises.

According to St. Ignatius and other advocates and practitioners of examen, the most profitable or ideal time to do the examen is during the evening before one goes to sleep. It serves as a prayerful review of the day so that one might be more vigilant, committed, and prepared for the challenges of the following day.

Another good option is to perform the examen the moment one wakes up in the morning. Going through the five steps first thing in the morning gives the examen-er some sort of inspiration, strength, guidance and direction for the whole day.

For busy persons who cannot really find definite and fixed time for examen during the day, they may make the transitional moments and break periods⁴⁵ of the day as an appropriate time for doing the examen.

⁴⁴ 'Finding God in all things' is a central, key concept in Ignatian prayer and spirituality. To learn more about this, confer Ma. Bautista, *Hearts Burning*, 13-16.

⁴⁵ Transitional moments refer to such periods of the day as when one is getting ready for work in the morning, driving/commuting to work, and driving/commuting home. Break periods would include lunch or coffee/snacks/merienda breaks from work or any other activity. For guide questions on examen during transitional or break periods of the day, see the webpage guide entitled "An Examination of Consciousness ... for

When sharing the examen as a family, the recommended time and place is after dinner in the evening at the living room, lounging area or at the dining table.

Goals and Importance

In general, the examen is considered as the chief means for assessing and managing one's relationship with God or one's spirituality. Aside from this, many people also find it helpful to practice this prayer exercise for various particular reasons or purposes. In this way, one can say that examen is a multi-purpose spiritual discipline. The following are among the many goals and reasons why this exercise of examen is considered as one of the most versatile and indispensable spiritual exercises for every Christian:

1) Awareness of God's loving and abiding presence in one's life.

What usually happens is that a Christian goes through his/her day without even noticing and appreciating fully God's presence. Because of this, he/she misses lots of opportunities for listening to God and deepening his/her relationship with Him. Not only that. The many events, activities, concerns, and influences of everyday life slowly and gradually distract him/her away from God. That is why, the act of reviewing one's day and seeing God's presence in and through one's consciousness and events of the day is very important. Through this regular practice, the examen-er constantly keeps his/her bond with God and his/her love for him stronger and deeper. This practice of daily renewal and commitment to Christ serves to refocus, centralize, and sharpen his/her vision for Christ. It is a Christian's daily "sharpening of the saw"⁴⁶ not only of his/her spiritual life, but also of his total self.

the 4 Transitional Times during the Day" (document on-line); available from http://vincentianspiritatwork.org/Inspiration/insp_2.htm; Internet; accessed 3 April 2003.

⁴⁶ This phrase is used by Stephen Covey to mean as "balanced self-renewal" or "exercising all four dimensions of our nature regularly and consistently in wise and balanced ways." See Stephen Covey, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), 287-307. This researcher strongly considers the examen as a tool for this balanced self-renewal.

2) *Opennes and responsiveness to the movements and directions of the Holy Spirit.*

This is closely tied up with the first goal. God's loving presence in one's lives is made possible through the presence of the Holy Spirit in him/her. As such, the role of the Holy Spirit in one's lives as Christians is indispensable. A Christian believes that Christ is present in him/her and continuously calls him/her to love God the Father and one another through his Holy Spirit. Even his/her response to Christ's invitation of love is possible only through the same Spirit dwelling in him/her and enabling him/her, together with Jesus, to call God "Father!" (Gal 4:6). For this reason, being docile and driven by the Holy Spirit is the key to authentic Christian spirituality today. The Spirit blows wherever she wills and this makes listening to and finding the Spirit quite difficult and tricky. With the daily exercise of examen, the examen-er opens his/her "eyes" and looks for the manifestations of the Holy Spirit in the many things that he/she does and the events that happen to him/her during the day. Without this consciousness and awareness exercise, the examen-er becomes "blind" to the directions of the Spirit in his/her life and even oblivious of the fact that he/she may already be under the influence of the evil spirit.

3) *Growth in experiential knowledge of, and intimacy with, God.*

Personal experience and knowledge of God is the foundation of one's spiritual life. The bible affirms the importance of this knowledge of God in the attainment of one's salvation – "And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (Jn. 17:3).

In biblical language, the word "to know" (Greek: *gnosein*) is more than a head-knowledge of someone. *Gnosein* denotes a deeper relationship and intimacy with a person just like the deep intimacy that exists between a husband and wife. Thus, this knowledge of God is something that is deep, intimate, and experiential, not just theoretical knowledge.

But in order for a friendship or any relationship to grow and prosper, constant time, attention, encounter, communication and listening are needed. The same is true in a Christian's relationship with God. The daily prayer of examen facilitates this experiential and intimate knowledge of God by providing these elements of spending

quality time, attention, encounter and listening to God. The examen trains the person to spend at least fifteen minutes a day and give his whole focus and attention to his/her relationship with God. He/she also reflects and meditates on his/her daily encounter with God through his/her experiences during the day and takes time to listen to what God is saying. If practiced daily and made as a habit, praying of examen becomes spontaneous and an essential means of nourishing one's love and intimacy with God.

4) A clearer discernment of God's will.

Discernment is the buzzword and stock-in-trade of Christian spirituality today. The importance of this discernment is based on the fact that humans are finite and limited and that only God the Father knows what is best for each of his children. This urges Christians to always seek and actualize God's will for their lives in general, for every major decision that confronts them, and for every particular situation that arises in their lives.

But seeking and doing God's will is not possible if one does not know what is God's will in the first place. Thus, every Christian needs discernment which is described as a "conscious attention to the Lord's movements within one's own life."⁴⁷

The examen is one of the many tools for such discernment today. The third point of the 5-point format of examen (review of one's experiences) is precisely designed for discovering God's will in the lives of Christians. The two basic questions⁴⁸ asked in this third point of examen are designed to help one pay attention to the different movements and inspirations of both the good Spirit (God) and the bad spirit (Satan) in and through the events and experiences, and one's reactions and feelings to these events and experiences of the day. As such, feelings are very crucial in discernment because they are indicators of God's presence and absence in the person. They are so to speak the "raw materials" of discernment.

⁴⁷ Charles Shelton, "Discernment in Everyday Life: Spiritual and Psychological Considerations," *Spirituality Today* 34, No. 4 (Winter 1982): 326.

⁴⁸ Again these two questions are: 1) "For what moment today I am most grateful?" and 2) "For what moment today I am least grateful?"

5) Keeping track of one's habits, minimizing the tendency to commit sin and maximizing the practice of virtues.

Moral theology today is primarily focused on the practice of virtues and not simply on avoidance of sins. Spirituality today follows and emphasizes this same virtue-centered approach. The examen, specifically the particular examen, is one good method of practicing virtues and getting rid of sin. The prayer is structured in such a way that the examen-er is urged to reflect and be aware of his most natural virtues and his almost innate vices (third point of examen) and be thankful for being able to keep up one's virtues, overcome one's vices and be repentant of any sign of laxity in the practice of personal virtues and conquest of vices (fourth point). Accordingly, the fifth point of the prayer challenges the examen-er to plan and actualize a strategy for maximizing one's strengths and minimizing one's weaknesses. On one hand, the person is directed to preserve and enhance his natural virtues. On the other hand, he/she is seriously urged to "divide and conquer" his vices by correcting them one at a time, starting with the greatest weakness, and replace it with an appropriate virtue.

6) Assists the individual to discover and eliminate the causes of his/her sins and defects.

This goal is connected with the previous one. Although replacing a vice with a virtue is a good and effective approach, ultimately the best way to deal it with is to uncover the cause or causes of the evil tendency and strike it out at the soonest.

This strategy is embedded in the format of examen, particularly that of the special examen. As previously pointed out, this exercise of special examen is best done during one's monthly recollection or annual retreat. Once the root causes of a person's weaknesses are identified, he/she must take all measures available to remove these causes. These causes will consequently be the target of his/her daily exercise of particular examen and be closely monitored by the daily consciousness examen.

7) Helps persons integrate the various elements, dimensions and relationships of their lives and direct them to God as the final goal.

With the negative effects of secularization, globalization, and technologization leading many people to alienation, disorientation, and fragmentation, the desire for personal integration is considered highly important and relevant today.

With the daily practice of examen, one can integrate and balance the many aspects of his/her life. In other words, the examen can be considered as a tool for multiple-integration. This exercise can be used to synergize all the different dimensions of one's personal and Christian life and direct them to God. Through this daily exercise of connecting and directing one's experiences and activities to God, one is gradually led to a personal wholeness, integration and balance of the various dimensions of his/her Christian life, including his/her various spiritual exercises and devotions. Thus, the examen is quite unique among other spiritual devotions or exercises because it is a tool that integrates all other spiritual disciplines and exercises.

8) Examen promotes deeper self-knowledge and awareness of one's moral 'fiber.'

One reason for doing the daily habit of examen is to gain deeper insight of one's moral and spiritual contours, particularly one's acquired tendencies, both good and bad, and one's most innate virtues and frailties. The Christian's habit of reflecting on his/her experiences will eventually led him/her to discover some patterns of both good and bad tendencies in his/her life. Although discovering these embedded strengths and weaknesses in one's lifestyle and character is the specific aim of the special examen, the particular and consciousness examen also help a person attain this self-knowledge if practiced daily for a long period of time.

All these different reasons for the doing the examen (which can also be taken as benefits of the daily exercise) are by nature interconnected simply because they are all directed to one ultimate goal – deeper union with God himself.

Although, there are many benefits one can gain from the daily practice of examen, it can only do as much. As a man-made method

of prayer, it has its own inherent weaknesses. The clear danger is to consider this practice as a cure-all for any problem and difficulty in one's relationship with God. It is therefore imperative that those who practice and promote consciousness examen as a means for spiritual growth and renewal must support the said practice by regular participation in the sacraments, other essential aids and means for spiritual growth, and other helpful practices as necessary.

Conclusion

Following Christ and putting God at the center of one's life is indeed never easy and cannot be achieved overnight. It requires a lot of time, trial and error, sacrifices, and hard work. It is in fact, a lifetime process and task. More than all these however, it requires the grace of God. This is because growth in one's relationship with God is more of God's doing rather than the human person's. Without God's grace drawing the person to God himself, no amount of human effort and spiritual exercises can bring a person closer to God. But since the grace and love of God is offered for all, the best response for a Christian is to be always open and cooperative with this grace. As this article shows, one of the most versatile spiritual exercises available today for cooperating and appropriating God's grace is the daily examen. It is, so to speak, a Christian's daily exercise of putting God first in his/her whole life. □