

THE EXAMEN AND THE EXERCISES— A RE-APPRAISAL

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WE ARE GIVEN the Daily Particular Examen (Puhl's 'of Conscience' is an addition not in the earliest spanish or latin texts)¹ with its Additional Directions early in the Exercises (Exx 24—31). The Daily Particular Examen is a practice to help 'guard carefully against the particular sin or defect with regard to which he seeks to correct or improve himself' (Exx 24). In the course of making the Spiritual Exercises the particular examen 'will be made to remove faults and negligences with regard to the Exercises and the Additional Directions. This will also be observed in the Second, Third and Fourth Week' (Exx 90; cf 160, 207).

Exx 32-42 gives us the General Examen of Conscience 'to purify oneself and to make a better confession' (Exx 32; my own translation)² based on the examination of thoughts, words and deeds. This is a brief handbook or treatise for the guidance of one helping another prepare for confession; perhaps especially when helping the less able of Annotation 18 (Exx 18). The Directories suggest that that the director have recourse to fuller treatment in the available manuals.

Exx 43 has the five points of the Method of Making the General Examen (Puhl adds 'of Conscience').³ It is implicit that this be at least a twice daily examen: 'an account of my soul from the time of rising up to the present examination' and 'in the same order as was explained under the Particular Examination of Conscience' (Exx 43) (again 'of Conscience' is added by Puhl).⁴ The 'in the same order' suggests the general examen is to be made at least twice a day and perhaps at the same times as the particular examen.

Exx 44 urges towards general confession and holy communion. Here Ignatius gives three reasons 'among many advantages of a general confession which one makes of his own accord'. Having

given these advantages he adds, 'it will be better to make this general confession immediately after the exercises of the First Week' (Exx 44).

No length of time is specified for making either the particular examen or the method of making the general examen. We are merely told that the particular examen is to be made after dinner and after supper. Perhaps these are also suitable times for making the general examen. The times themselves suggest periods during the day when a person is not likely to be too occupied with other matters. Ignatius suggests that the leisured times following meals can be profitably used to look back over the previous segment of the day, and to look forward to the part of the day still to come.

Examen in the First Week

To suggest that the examens have nothing to do with sin or defect is to resist the manifest meaning of the text. Besides which, the very position of the examen materials in the book of the Spiritual Exercises, between the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23) and the exercises of the First Week (Exx 45 *et seq.*), underlines that the examens do have to do with sin and defect. The 'indifference' of the Principle and Foundation immediately puts a retreatant in touch with his own lack of indifference and with a few very particular, even habitual, ways in which that lack shows itself. These particular ways are obviously grist to the mill of the Particular Examen. They also allow the General Examen something to bite on. This increasing awareness of the retreatant's own lively involvement in evil sets the scene for the exercises of the First Week. The emphasis in the First Week is not so much to know oneself as someone who sins, nor so much to experience forgiveness. Though such knowledge frequently deepens in a retreatant during the First Week, Ignatius seems to assume that one making the Exercises already acknowledges himself as a 'sinner forgiven'. As sinner forgiven, the retreatant in the First Week begs for the grace (revelation) of a deep heartfelt knowledge of and abhorrence for the sheer disordered malice of sin and evil, in the face of his knowledge of the utter loving kindness of his God, and in order that his service of God be free from the influence of evil. This is why Ignatius would have the retreatant ask for 'shame and confusion' in the First Exercise (Exx 48) and for the colloquy place himself before Christ on the Cross in that same exercise (Exx 53). The

exercitant is asking for the grace of reconciliation; the heartfelt grace of knowing that he is one of Christ's redeemed.

Examen—personal experience in retreat

Rules for the Discernment of Spirits appear in the text of the Exercises in Annotations 6, 8, 9 and 10. These rules are to be explained as soon as the exercitant is experiencing desolations and consolations. In this way, with the help of the rules, a person may begin to exercise his own discernment, the better to prepare and dispose his soul 'to rid itself of all inordinate attachments, and, after their removal, of seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul' (Exx 1). Underlying the use of the rules for discernment is the principle of learning from one's own experience; 'this produces greater spiritual relish and fruit than if one in giving the Exercises had explained and developed the meaning at great length' (Exx 2). This principle is reinforced by the warnings of Annotations 15 and 17 against partiality, over-direction and probing on the part of the director. 'Therefore, the director of the Exercises, as a balance at equilibrium, without leaning to one side or the other, should permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord' (Exx 15). This same principle of appropriation of one's own experience dictates that the Rules for Discernment more appropriate to the Second Week be explained only when 'the exercitant is being assailed and tempted under the appearance of good' (Exx 10).

In the course of the full Exercises, the role of the examens is to increase a person's awareness, putting him in affective touch with each half-day's experiences, so that he might better know, own, and appropriate those experiences in a heart-felt manner. With the help of the appropriate rules the retreatant's subsequent discerning of his felt-experience throws light on how he might better compose himself in the exercises to come, for the sake of what he is seeking and finding in the attraction of the Lord. The review of prayers similarly gathers the grace experiences of each prayer period, together with the person's responses or lack of response. The exercitant is taught how better to dispose himself for the following time of prayer. The review of prayer 'has become the preparation of "points" for the next exercise'.⁵ This is especially true when the following exercise is a repetition or an application of the senses. These exercises form a major part of the Spiritual

Exercises. Without a sensitively flexible use of the examens and reviews of prayer, the raw material of personally appropriated and discerned spiritual experiences, upon which these exercises feed, would not be available. A person who is unable to learn from his own experience cannot make the full Exercises according to the intent of Ignatius.

The particular examen gathers the experiences of each half-day, including the reviews, allowing the exercitant to pick up any experiences, graces, moods, responses, etc., that would not be touched on by the review alone. The fruit of the particular examens is similarly fed into the repetitions. With practice the use of the examens begins to throw up patterns of God's initiatives and the person's responses. Various aspects of those experiences and responses (both good and evil, helpful and unhelpful) may loom larger or seem to be of more central and crucial importance. Naturally the examens will ensure that these central aspects will be looked for and noticed, without neglecting other possibly new aspects. For instance, a retreatant may begin to notice a habit or inner attitude being a major obstacle to a fuller awareness of the scope of God's call. This again points to a development in the use and value of the examens.

Examen and discernment

There is more to say about the interconnection of the various forms of prayerful reflection and the discernment of spirits. The various forms of examination certainly provide the raw material for discernment, by giving a person access, after each half-day and each period of prayer, to the ways of God's gracing in his life and to the manner of his responses to those ways. As discernment develops it leads to a more accurate sensitivity to God and to his gracing. This greater sensitivity in discernment itself makes demands. One such demand is a greater insistence on examen. Ignatius advises the exercitant, when in desolation, to 'insist more upon prayer, upon meditation, and on much examination of ourselves' (Exx 319). Again Ignatius warns the retreatant, with a strong nudge towards the subjects of the First Method of Prayer, 'the enemy of our human nature investigates from every side all our virtues, theological, cardinal, and moral. Where he finds the defences of eternal salvation weakest and most deficient, there he attacks and tries to take us by storm' (Exx 327). The examen helps a person keep under review his points of weakness as they

become more clearly seen. It also opens him more to the particular grace of God that he seeks. Such is precisely the role of the particular examen. At the same time under God's grace, the examen urges the person actively to foster his co-operation with that grace. Again it is to be noted that this examination is not just a negative one, but has positive and negative elements working in concert. In his book on discernment Jules Toner comments that Ignatius:

is telling us about Satan in order to help us to oppose him intelligently as well as boldly. The obvious practical conclusion is that we need to know ourselves, our strengths and weaknesses, and be prepared for the evil one, unless we want to find our defences penetrated before we know what has happened. We are back at the ignatian emphasis on examination, reflection on our conscious lives, in order to take possession of ourselves for the service of God.⁶

Examen—a process

As a retreatant grows in spirit and is no longer 'a person unskilled in spiritual things, and if he is tempted grossly and openly, for example, by bringing before his mind obstacles to his advance in the service of God our Lord, such as labours, shame, fear for his good name in the eyes of the world, etc.' (Exx 9), and is now 'being assailed and tempted under the appearance of good' (Exx 10), he is to be given the Second Week Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. These Second Week rules point up the vital roles of the various examinations and reflections, and their interconnections with one another. It is crucial to this 'more accurate discernment' (Exx 328), that the exercitant be able to distinguish between consolation without previous cause, and consolation with previous cause. The examens and reflection on prayer no longer merely appropriate the experiences of consolation and desolation and make it available for discernment. The more accurate discernment depends on knowing whether the consolation had or had not preceding cause. Ignatius tells us why. 'When consolation is without previous cause . . . there can be no deception in it, since it can proceed from God our Lord only' (Exx 336). Whilst 'if a cause precedes, both the good angel and the evil spirit can give consolation to a soul, but for a quite different purpose' (Exx 331), and 'it is a mark of the evil spirit to assume the appearance

of an angel of light' (Exx 332). So the exercitant is urged to 'carefully observe the whole course of our thoughts' (Exx 333). He will not be able to do this observation unless his examens have become sensitively aware of more than just sins and negligences. The retreatant will of course endeavour to be aware of sins and negligences too, but more is necessary. His examens need to be sensitive to more than unconnected instances or to unrelated atomic experiences. Ignatius is here talking about a process. That is, a series of connected and related instances each leading to another. A person's reflections on such a process need to be much more subtle than the mere awareness, in concrete instances, of good or evil, or of consolation or desolation. The retreatant needs to observe the direction of the whole flow of any set of experiences at any given moment, and not merely to be looking to see whether any specific instances, as such, are good or evil. My experience is that, by and large, people making the full Spiritual Exercises, according to either the nineteenth or the twentieth Annotations, in the process do grow precisely in this more accurate and fuller awareness of spiritual movements. Toner confirms that:

discernment of spirits is not done merely on the basis of spiritual consolation and desolation. For, although these are helpful norms for judging the origin of thoughts and impulses, the latter are equally norms for judging the origin of spiritual consolation.

Toner suggests that what Ignatius is pointing to as a sign of the Spirit moving us is 'an integral experience in which all the elements are mutually validating'. One should not interpret an experience as being prompted by the Spirit simply because it begins with what seem to be 'holy thoughts' or consolation. This may be dangerously deceptive.⁷

Examen in the Election process

Ignatius's caveat here is of obvious importance to the one who is involved in an Election, or to one considering a reform of life with wide-ranging implications. There are enough people whose every latest bright idea, without more ado or further reflection, is the 'will of God', often not only for themselves, but for others too. On the other hand, Toner rightly says that we should not be nervous about the possibility of being deceived. We should of course be 'calmly attentive' to what may be from the evil spirit

'as far as we can see at our present stage of spritual growth, without undue strain'. So, the real danger as far as Toner is concerned is that we fail to live 'an examined life' within the limits of present capacity.⁸ Ignatius was taught by God through his own personal experiences, and in Exx 334 he gives the exercitant an outline whereby he too might be taught by God and learn by reflection on his own experiences. Toner's commentary on this rule of discernment is excellent in that it underlines the crucial importance of the examens and that it shows how the very practice of them increases their scope and value in a life increasingly contemplative in its style.⁹

Although there can be no deception when consolation is without previous cause, nonetheless such consolation needs to be distinguished from the period following it:

In this second period the soul frequently forms various resolutions and plans which are not granted directly by God our Lord. They may come from our own reasoning on the relations of our concepts and on the consequences of our judgments, or they may come from the good or evil spirit. Hence, they must be carefully examined before they are given full approval and put into execution (Exx 336).¹⁰

Toner notes that this 'careful examination' is absolutely vital and involves two stages: first, to look at the whole experience 'in order to discern when the consolation ended and the period of affective afterglow began', and second, to note whether the thoughts being examined came after the consolation ended and then to subject these thoughts to careful judgment.¹¹ Further on Toner once again reaffirms that it is very unwise (given how easy it is to misjudge our own experiences) to act upon things that appear to come during 'consolation without previous cause' without thorough examination and testing.¹²

The contemplations during the Election

The First Annotation states that the Spiritual Exercises, after the removal of inordinate attachments, urge a person to the 'seeking and finding the will of God in the disposition of our life for the salvation of our soul' (Exx 1). The exercitant making the Kingdom exercise asks 'of our Lord the grace not to be deaf to his call, but prompt and diligent to accomplish his most holy will'

(Exx 91). During the First Week the exercitant will have gained some knowledge not only of his 'deafness' to the Lord's call, but also the beginnings of a realization of how in fact the Lord has been and is calling him. The process continues in the Second and succeeding Weeks. It comes to a focus in the materials Ignatius suggests for the consideration of different states of life. Ignatius tells the retreatant:

While continuing to contemplate his life, let us begin to investigate and ask in what kind of life or in what state his Divine Majesty wishes to make use of us . . . let us also see how we ought to prepare ourselves to arrive at perfection in whatever state or way of life God our Lord may grant us to choose (Exx 135).

The colloquy of the Three Classes dominates the exercises of the Second Week. Many times a day the retreatant begs for 'the grace to choose what is more for the glory of his Divine Majesty and the salvation of my soul' (Exx 152). A person making a choice is reminded that 'In every good choice, as far as depends on us, our intention must be simple. I must consider only the end for which I am created, that is, for the praise of God our Lord and for the salvation of my soul. Hence, whatever I choose must help me to this end for which I am created' (Exx 169). The exercitant is urged to 'desire and seek nothing except the greater praise and glory of God our Lord as the aim of all he does. For everyone must keep in mind that in all that concerns the spiritual life his progress will be in proportion to his surrender of self-love and of his own will and interests' (Exx 189). The sixteenth century seems to have had a great predilection for putting forward principles in a manner that seems excessively negative to a twentieth century person. In all the above, including Exx 189, Ignatius is urging a retreatant to a felt-knowledge of the heart and mind of Christ (cf Phil 2, 5). At the same time as putting off his own love, will and interests, the person is putting on Christ's love, Christ's will, and Christ's interests.

It is the same Lord whom the retreatant continues to contemplate in the gospel mysteries. The time of growing intimacy in which the contemplated mysteries of the life of Jesus illuminate and flood the felt-knowledge of the exercitant is precisely the time when the person moves from being aware of the lead of the Lord to a deeper understanding of the kind of life-style which the Lord is calling

him to live. In other words, the possibility of real and deep life-questions is opened up. For a person already in an established way of life, light may be shed on his manner of living out that life-style. The contemplation of the mysteries of the life of Jesus may suggest areas in need of reform or amendment, so that the person's personal vocation from the Lord may be responded to more completely.

Exx 170—188 give Ignatius's help concerning the matter of such a decision and the three times when such choices may be better made. This whole matter involves not only the continuing contemplation of the life of Jesus, but also, as we have seen, much careful reflection and examination. The whole process will make great use of the various examens, reviews of prayer and the Rules for the Discernment of Spirits. At any time in the full Spiritual Exercises, the exercitant making five hours of prayer a day will have plenty to occupy him. At a time of decisive choice or of reform of life-style, the day is very full indeed.¹³

Desire, not moral routine

In a personal testimony of prayer experience Daniel O'Hanlon confesses:

that I have come to realize more clearly, the degree to which interior, intuitive, nonrational, nonconceptual experience is at the heart of the ignatian Exercises It is one of the ironies of history that—even though at their origin in the sixteenth century the Exercises were mistrusted and attacked because of their appeal to the experience 'of the creature directly with its Creator and Lord' (Exx 15), and although Ignatius was cross-examined by the Inquisition and even temporarily imprisoned, more than once, on that account—in later centuries, including our own, the Exercises came to be despised by many as no more than a manual of routines imposed on the mind and will after the manner of a military drill. A sad bit of irony.¹⁴

It should be clear from all that has been said that the examens are not meant to be rigidly imposed drills. They are flexible instruments, but they need to be used with some sensitivity and awareness. Then, far from imposing a moral strait-jacket on a person, the examens help the person to see more clearly what is the quality of his life (values, motives, attitudes, relationships, etc.). They also help a person to know more affectively his own

better desires. Further this increasing clarity gives freedom to the exercitant, under God's gracing, to make decisions which resonate more truly with his deeper desires. So it is that a person is recommended to make the examens immediately he has started to consider and reflect on where he finds himself regarding the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23).¹⁵ Examination comes after experience, in order to depth that experience. There is no examen, for Ignatius, in the coldness of abstract logic.

The Exercises are not all that interested in past or present performance in so far as knowing the 'private thoughts and sins of the exercitant' (Exx 17) are concerned. Yet the retreatant's history of faith and of un-faith (sin) is not to be excluded as irrelevant. Rather that history is to be used cautiously so as to put the person in touch with his present desires. The particular exercises that a retreatant makes can then bite into those desires. The Exercises concern themselves with unlocking a person's contemplative affectivity. The examens allow opportunity for the exercitant to look at, ponder, sort out, and know from experience his mixture of good and evil. The examens can stir his desires for the better. They can allow freedom from whatever might blind, limit or restrict. They can stir in a person the freedom to look up and out contemplatively.

Examen is freedom

A hard-headed moralistic approach to the use of the examen usually only succeeds in destroying the person by driving him into the ground of guilty poor self-image. The moralistic approach is all too likely to consign a person to the failure of constantly falling short, to repeated condemnation. Certainly it can succeed in putting a person in touch with hopelessness and guilt, but not necessarily in touch with sin. Such an approach almost certainly does not put a person in affective touch with the merciful love of God in Christ, which alone inflames faith, hope and love. The guided, but more free-flowing, approach of Ignatius of letting 'the Creator deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord' (Exx 15) allows a person's experience to be unforced and real. In freedom the person learns increasingly how to live out his personal vocation. Then the examens allow him to find out for himself (Exx 2), with freedom to choose, what is better for the living out of the actual ways the Lord calls in his personal vocation.¹⁶

Conclusion

Since each element of reflection, review, examination and discernment, without losing their distinctiveness, blends into each other, I would not want to be very quick to separate out definitely too independently these elements which are meant to flow into each other in a way which is cumulative during each day and from day to day. In reducing the purpose of the examens to a consideration of sins and faults only, I do believe that there is a danger of separating out the examen too much from the integrating and cumulative flow of contemplative living. It is precisely this possibility in the examens for truly contemplative growth that Aschenbrenner and others have reasserted. I hope that I have shown that this reassertion is well based in the text of the Spiritual Exercises and its dynamic in practice.¹⁷

NOTES

¹ *MHSJ*, vol 100, pp 166-67.

² *Ibid.*, pp 172-73.

³ *Ibid.*, pp 182-83.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp 182-83.

⁵ O'Leary, Brian: 'Repetition and review' in *The Way Supplement*, 27 (Spring 1976), p 55.

⁶ Toner, Jules: *A commentary on St Ignatius' rules for the discernment of spirits*, (St Louis, 1982), p 202.

⁷ Toner, p 230.

⁸ Toner, pp 231-32.

⁹ See Toner, pp 236-37.

¹⁰ See Egan, Harvey: *The Spiritual Exercises and the ignatian mystical horizon*, (St Louis, 1976), for a study of consolation, the Second Week Rules for Discernment, and the link with basic elements in the Exercises including the Election.

¹¹ Toner, p 252.

¹² Toner, pp 255-56.

¹³ See English, John: *Discernment and the examen*, (Guelph, 1981), which develops the interconnection between examination and discernment with a view to discovering the will of God.

¹⁴ O'Hanlon, Daniel: 'Integration of christian practices: a western christian looks East' in *Studies in the spirituality of Jesuits*, vol xvi, no 3 (May 1984), p 23.

¹⁵ Reiterated in the Directories: *MHSJ*, vol 76, especially Ignatius, p 82 and Polanco, p 292.

¹⁶ This is summed up well in O'Hanlon, *op.cit.*, p 20.

¹⁷ This article is an adaptation of part of a much longer unpublished paper on the Examen. We are grateful to David Townsend for permission to edit the text.