

# EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE AND *REVISION DE VIE*

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SINCE VATICAN II many Congregations have revised their constitutions and rules. Instead of exact and explicit guidance on the number and length of daily 'spiritual exercises', there is now a much greater flexibility, allowing individuals to find the particular forms more suited to their own needs. But with the sudden flowering of new forms and expressions some confusion has grown up – and not merely one of terminology – which risks the neglect or even loss of a whole tradition that is rich in experience.

In recent years, *révision de vie* has found a place in the life and rule of a good number of religious communities and apostolic groups. In a variety of vastly different forms it has replaced a whole series of traditional exercises: the *culpa* or chapter of faults, monthly reflection and days of recollection, and in many cases the individual examination of conscience.

Is this 'revision of life' an adequate substitute for the traditional examen of conscience, so intimately bound up with spiritual health and growth, according to the best authorities?

A brief investigation of both these exercises would appear to be useful, both to bring out their similarities and differences, and also to find out how they may complement each other as indispensable aids to christian maturity.

The examen traditionally is a three-fold exercise: in self-knowledge, discernment and detachment.

## *Self-knowledge*

The greeks prescribed self-knowledge as a starting point of all progress in wisdom. Every form of liberation must follow the basic rule 'know yourself'. Every psychotherapist, no matter what school he belongs to, can do no more than help his 'patient' first to an awareness of self, in terms of psychological reality, but also of him-

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self as a responsible human person. This return to oneself ('coming to one's senses') which the examen is designed to effect makes a person face up to his everyday experience; he stands alongside himself – takes stock of himself and his inner motivations. Now this is not something that happens naturally and instinctively: our defence mechanisms set up a kind of insulation around our inner self, so that we manage to 'get by' without apparent threat to our precious but very precarious peace and security. But these defences prevent us from living fully and developing our human and spiritual potential. It was within this framework of human and spiritual wisdom that the desert fathers and the first monastic communities adopted the examen as a necessary means of spiritual progress. Normally it is a matter of awareness, acceptance and purification of our own faults: and at its centre, the 'particular examen', the focussing on the 'dominant' fault, in order to find a remedy. The different schools of spirituality through the centuries have used set methods calculated to make the most of such exercises: thus the ignatian method, concentrating for weeks, and even months if necessary, on a besetting fault until there is improvement; or the sulpician method, where one makes a complete survey of one's spiritual and moral conduct in search of any weak points. In examen one brings oneself up short, to come face to face with one's sinfulness, and to find the remedy through a long and painful process.

### *Discernment of Spirits*

'Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God'.<sup>1</sup>

Psychology has taught us how easy self-deception is: how we can mistake sentimentalism, a pious veneer, for the reality of faith, a minimal good will for the fire of divine charity, or even psychopathological symptoms for the manifestations of extraordinary graces. Paul had to warn his first converts about the constant need for discernment.<sup>2</sup>

By frequent examination of conscience, the adult can learn to discern the spirits in all his conscious impulses and instinctive movements towards choice; he can assess his behaviour, for example, in the light of the spiritual fruits listed in the Letter to the Galatians: 'But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control'.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> 1 Jn 4, 1.

<sup>2</sup> Rom 12, 2; Phil 1, 9–11.

<sup>3</sup> Gal 5, 22–23.

This discernment should affect everything that goes to make up our daily life. Examen is not simply introspection; it is to pass judgment on oneself in the light of certain objective standards. It is, of course, the Spirit of God who sets and applies the standard. The examen depends on the revealed word; it is thus that one learns to discover the Spirit who speaks and who acts in us, and to be faithful to that Spirit.

### *Detachment from self*

If there is one true measure of spiritual progress it is growth in 'detachment from self'. An examen which does not result in such progressive detachment will ultimately do more harm than good. The danger of continued introspection is obvious: it can lead to discouragement and depression. What I bring to my conscious awareness, I must see as real, as objective. As St Alphonsus Rodriguez, the jesuit brother, observed: 'When I sense something bitter in myself, I place this bitterness between myself and God until it becomes sweetness'. For the stoics, reflection on the self had to be translated into an effort of the will which often came to nothing; for the christian, examen prepares us for response, leaves us wholly open to that grace which alone can transform us completely. Conversion is no longer seen as an exhausting effort of will, so often disappointing and discouraging. Rather it is a despoilment, a going out of oneself.

### *Revision of life*

This exercise was first worked out and developed over the last twenty years, first in the Catholic Action worker-groups; it was then adopted by others and adapted to suit different needs.<sup>4</sup> Through all its considerable variations, three features have remained constant. It is, first of all, a *factual review of life*, based on actual experience and demanding, as well as a basic realism, a lived and living faith which reaches above the reasoned approach and the moral outlook. Whether it concerns the situation of a particular individual, or something common to the group as a whole, or again some fact about the group's living circumstances, the same question is always faced: what is its significance and implications, both on the 'natural' level and in christian terms.

Even though the word 'revision' itself suggests a backward-

<sup>4</sup> Cf Bonduelle, J., O.P.: *La Revision de vie: Situation actuelle* (Paris, 1965).

looking activity, yet this method is above all directed towards the future. Interpretation of past experience is intended to lead to a better grasp of the future and of its christian possibilities.

It is essentially a *group activity*, which implies inter-dependence and inter-action. My personal account of experience influences the judgment of the other members; their evaluation of it in turn affects mine. Beyond the common aim uniting the members of the group and the techniques which enable it to function efficiently, the essence of this common revision of life is this: each person's interpretation or judgment is enriched by that of the others. (It can, of course, be conditioned by the others!) In a group where the people feel free to be themselves, where what one person says is understood and accepted by the rest, there is built up a fund of psychological and theological resources.

The attempt to see happenings and events in the light of God's providential care is likely to be much more successful when done on a group basis. Yet we must insist that there must be ample room for freedom if the exercise is going to be genuinely fruitful. Few of us are called to be prophets, even though prophets do still exist in our day; but it may be that we are discovering that prophecy is no longer so much an individual charism. Noting and interpreting the signs of the times is becoming more and more the task of the group: one which rejects defence-mechanism and where real communication is possible.

Here a simple scriptural context is not enough. We need a positive theological climate. If theology is above all the prophetic interpretation of history as the realization of God's salvific plan, then revision of life should be one of those privileged instances where this interpretation is applied to the events of everyday life. A review which would concentrate exclusively on formulating value-judgments on life (often more inspired by social and cultural considerations than by the gospel) would lack, it seems to me, its basic and essential meaning and become no more than a 'sensitivity session' with a spiritual colouring.

It is in the context of the everyday that the Lord's mission must find its term. It is there that we have to recognize (and this is the essence of *révision de vie*) God's action and our practical response. This group recognition is never enough in itself: it must always lead to action. Much has been written of the different methods of revision. The use of fixed formulae can be of help to groups which are just starting up, but in the long run each must find its own method.

On the other hand, revision of life, to be fruitful, must always evince a certain dynamism: a movement from the particular fact of experience to its interpretation and then back again to its implications in practice. One tries to discover in one's experience the action of God revealing himself and speaking in our situation; and it is thus that we respond to this call from God and accept the task offered us. This dynamism is also expressed in the formula which has been at the basis of revision of life: see-judge-act.

### *Differences and similarities*

After this brief examination of the two forms of spiritual exercise, we must attempt an answer to our initial question: can revision of life satisfactorily replace examination of conscience? First we must note the several clear differences between the two.

1. Examen is in the best sense a reflection on oneself. We have stressed its importance for personal growth. But revision of life is primarily geared to action. Both methods, to be of use, should express themselves in a *praxis*. The purpose of examen is to bring about the daily conversion of the individual, who strives to be increasingly open to the influence of grace and to rid himself of all obstacles to this influence. Revision of life aims primarily at an improved missionary activity, both personal and collective. Quite clearly, any effective and christian missionary action demands an interior conversion, but this will involve two different, though not wholly distinct, phases.

2. Examen requires a reflexive moral judgment which *only* the individual can make, in the light of the gospel and also of his own situation. This moral judgment helps us to recognize sin in its subtlest forms. Revision of life, however, does not require such a judgment; no one can pass a true judgment on another's conduct.

This difference is crucial; yet it is very often ignored in practice. So many revisions of life degenerate into criticism and self-criticism, deflecting the group from its real aim (discovery of God's action in the world) into a kind of collective narcissism. Many religious communities have fallen into this trap, and have confused revision of life with confession of faults. The group review can indeed lead to a collective awareness of sinfulness: social injustice, worldliness etc.; but such an awareness tends to be on the level of feeling rather than moral conscience.

These are the essential differences; what of the similarities? Revision of life, like the examen, leads to a deeper self-knowledge, makes

room for the discernment of spirits and helps produce a certain detachment. These likenesses are, however, quite secondary and occur at different levels. What is the role of others in this self-knowledge? Certainly there is a relevance at the psychological level: others can act as a mirror for the self and its experiences. Yet this only occurs in very precise conditions; there must be true communication in order that communion may be achieved. Gabriel Marcel and Martin Buber have highlighted this dialectic of self-knowledge which occurs through the knowledge of the other: '... the other, whose presence I experience, brings me interior renewal. His presence is revelatory, in that it makes me what I would not be without this presence'.<sup>5</sup>

3. In dialogue with the other, I come to know, to realize myself. At the level of moral consciousness, however, the situation is different; here, certainly, others can enlighten me. But it is only in a 'face to face' encounter with God that I can come to awareness of sin. God alone reveals my sin to me.

As for discernment of spirits, it can indeed occur in group activity; one might even say that this is the precise purpose of revision of life. But here again there are two different levels. In examination of conscience I am discerning essentially the Spirit who is present to myself, with his gifts of charity and peace; in the revision of life the group strives to discover God's action in the world. Examen appeals to that inner personal experience which is very often incommunicable. Revision of life concerns a common experience available to all.

Again, 'detachment from self' occurs much more completely in group revision of life than in examen, since interior conversion needs to be expressed in definite action; in action alone is the heart truly converted.

Many actions must remain at the personal level; they cannot be shared with the group.

Our first conclusion, therefore is that revision of life does not replace examination of conscience. The two 'exercises' have different aims.

However, we have no wish to rate one more highly than the other. Revision of life – a recent addition to the Church's life – is just as essential as examen.

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<sup>5</sup> Troisfontaines, R., S.J.: *De l'Existence à l'Etre: la Philosophie de Gabriel Marcel* (Louvain, 1953), tome II, p 21.

*Inter-action*

Social psychologists have stressed that the tension between the individual and the group, between the desire to belong and the fear of losing one's identity, can be a source of energy for both. The image of the tightrope walker, most secure at the wire's maximum point of tension, may suggest how both examen and revision of life can contribute to the individual's spiritual growth.

Desire for discussion and dialogue is characteristic of our period. Meetings, conferences, representative assemblies, are found at all levels, including the Church. This is an undeniable and clearly positive development. But here too one can err by excess; many groups do in fact show unhealthy symptoms. The group which goes round in circles, fascinated by its own rhetoric and incapable of arriving at any decision or practical commitment, is not only unproductive but constitutes an obstacle to any personal growth. Again, certain defence mechanisms operate to prevent members from facing up to the truth of themselves. For a revision of life to be really valuable, each member should have already made a personal examen. Revision is not a group-therapy where each 'uses' the others to unburden himself, hoping to find some solution thereby. To be sure, the group can give valuable support: recognition of common problems, open and friendly exchange of ideas, understanding and acceptance: all these are factors which help to establish interior peace. And yet this is not the primary object of the exercise. It will be effective only insofar as each member has already taken steps to attain inner peace: that is, by examination of conscience.

As we have already indicated, examen can itself become a barren intellectual exercise, leading to excessive scruples or morbid narcissism. The examination of conscience is by its very nature self-centred. Revision of life can counteract the negative aspects of this introspection. Reflection on actual experience prevents self-deception and that escape in rationalization which gives a good conscience but leads nowhere. Contact with others helps us to check the objectivity of our self-knowledge, placing it in its right perspective: moreover we are often harsher judges of ourselves than others would be.

But above all, revision of life demands that we translate the inner conversion sought in examen into practical terms. What value has a conversion if it does not issue forth in active charity? 'He who says he is in the light and hates his brother is in darkness still'.<sup>6</sup> The

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<sup>6</sup> 1 Jn 2, 9.

heart set free from itself to love can find the Lord who acts in the world, in everyday experience and in others. This dialectical movement from the self to the other is the guarantee of a balanced spiritual growth. Traditionally, this balance was assured by spiritual direction; but this is no longer very popular, either with directors or 'directed'. I have no wish to superimpose revision and direction; yet revision of life, besides being much more in use at present, does present certain advantages: greater objectivity, practical orientation, support, etc. For many, revision of life is the only opportunity they have to survey their christian life together with another; and it would seem that it is easier, especially for the young, to open up in a group than in the sometimes austere context of traditional spiritual direction. But this is by the way . . .

Both exercises are means, and nothing more. They should not be elevated to some kind of absolute status and should be judged only by their results: spiritual growth in community. Our christian responsibility extends beyond ourselves to those whom God puts in our path. Both examen and revision of life can degenerate into psychologism. And this is what must be emphasized as a last point. A fuller knowledge of human psychology and of group dynamics is valuable and an aid to growth: but it is not the essential. These exercises should take place in an atmosphere of prayer: here is the indispensable. Whether it is prayer made in silence to God who sees in secret, or a common prayer where we can truly say: 'Our Father . . . thy will be done', prayer must be the foundation, as it is the goal, of any spiritual exercise. An examen and a revision of life which end in prayer and an openness to the grace of God, encountered in ourselves and in others, will then be *spiritual* exercises in the truest sense; and this is their ultimate value.