

THE IGNATIAN EXAMEN: A METHOD OF THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

By DONALD ST. LOUIS

THE SIXTEENTH-CENTURY world of Ignatius Loyola was one of profound change and cultural upheaval, a world in which the Church itself, long the centre and stabilizing force of a united Christendom, was experiencing tensions and challenges from both within and without. In this age of rapid change and cultural fragmentation, Ignatius's vision was of a new and different style of religious life, one that would be free to be more actively responsive to the multiple and diverse needs of the Church, and so the apostolic body he founded differed from the religious institutes which had preceded the Society of Jesus. Ignatius sought to form a group of prayerful, highly-disciplined and well-trained men whose entire being was poised in availability for mission. Mobility was to be a key in this new religious order: 'It is according to our vocation to travel to any part of the world where there is hope of God's greater service and the help of souls'.¹

From beginning to end, Ignatius's ideal was love and service, a love which makes itself known in deeds.² God's glory in apostolic service was ever the measure and the norm, that towards which all else was focussed and in terms of which decisions and choices were made. Thus Ignatius and his men would leave the cloister and seclusion of traditional religious communities for a life of active engagement in the world. Contemplation and action were not enemies for Ignatius: he was a mystic, but his was a mysticism of service and action.³ And if active ministry was to be the arena in which to seek and find God, then reflection on one's experiences of ministry would be critically important for Ignatius. In both his personal spirituality and in his direction and guidance of others, it is clear how important for Ignatius was the practice of prayerfully reflecting on one's experience of service. To this end, 'he seemed

to count primarily on the examens of conscience from which he never dispensed',⁴ and 'on which [he] laid more stress and considered of greater importance than meditation'.⁵

There can be little doubt but that Ignatius saw the Examen as a central element of the spirituality of his new body of active religious, and succeeding generations of religious have inherited the Examen as a practice of piety. But, Ignatius's clear and prominent valuing of this method of prayer in the life of an active religious notwithstanding, the experience of most religious is that it is the first thing to be abandoned as an irrelevant interruption in a life of committed, active ministry. This very fact would seem to betray a fundamental misunderstanding of what Ignatius intended this prayer to be.

The thesis of this article is that rather than the narrowly focused moralistic exercise in self-scrutiny that it has become for many generations of religious, Ignatius saw the Examen fundamentally as a prayer of discernment, a vitally illuminating and dynamic experience of prayerful reflection that both celebrates and enhances one's awareness of and response to the Lord who is ever-present and ever-active in our world of human experience. In the language of contemporary pastoral theological literature, it is what is commonly called a method of theological reflection on ministry.⁶

It is a well-known fact that Ignatius was no literary stylist, a fact which may well contribute to a misunderstanding of the Examen when not seen in the context of his overall thought. Avery Dulles and Harvey Egan have both argued that for a seminal thinker such as Ignatius, whose theology was essentially pastorally based, it is important to examine his writings in the light of the total 'horizon' within which he represents his approach.⁷ Such is certainly the case with the Examen, whose five points, tersely and laconically stated, reflect a wealth of pastoral experience and profound spiritual insight that becomes apparent only when one sees them in the context of the larger sweep of Ignatius's spiritual theology.

Accordingly, what follows is an effort to explicate the rich and profound vision of this prayer of reflection by viewing the Examen in the context of the *Exercises*, relating the five 'points' to aspects of Ignatius's doctrine and practice as developed in the various weeks of the *Spiritual Exercises* as a whole. Viewing the Examen in this broader context can hopefully recapture and highlight the

deeper meaning and intent of Ignatius, and underscore just why this particular prayer form was so vitally important for this man who was so passionately committed to the practice of ministry.

The first point

The first point is to give thanks to God our Lord for the favours received (Exx 43).

This first point establishes the ignatian Examen as an existential, experientially-focussed exercise. Having learned during his months at Manresa to attend carefully to his own inner experiences as the graced context for encounter with the divine, Ignatius thus begins this prayer with where one is, which includes a reflective awareness of where one has been — with the events, circumstances, relationships and experiences that have shaped and influenced one's history and led to this present moment of self-awareness before God. What is important here is not so much an exhaustive list of 'the favours received', but rather a deepening sense of the living truth of one's life as richly and deeply blessed by God, as suffused with the gracious presence and action of God (cf Exx 230–237).

If ignatian spirituality is one of 'finding God in all things', this presupposes, of course, that God can be found because he is present and involved in all of reality. Clearly, Ignatius is no deist. His God is vitally, dynamically active, an emphasis in ignatian thought that is clearly evidenced in the *Exercises*, and which becomes an underlying presupposition for the entirety of his spiritual doctrine. As seen in the *Exercises*, the God of Ignatius freely, deliberately, and compassionately chooses to enter into the fullness of the human condition in all its poverty, weakness and sin (Exx 103, 116), and in all its historical particularity (Exx 103), inviting the retreatant to labour with him in companionship for the liberation and salvation of this world, in order to share with him in the joy and freedom of his victory (Exx 95).

This active presence of God is also highlighted in the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God which both caps the *Exercises* and also recapitulates all that has gone before.⁸ Here, Ignatius would have us consider 'how God dwells in creatures . . .' (Exx 235) and 'how God labours for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth . . .' (Exx 236). For Ignatius, this God who is so present

and active labours precisely in order to lavish on us his gifts in a reciprocity of love, for 'love consists in a mutual sharing of goods . . .' (Exx 231).

Ignatius has the retreatant consider these gifts not only in a general, global sort of way, but in all their concreteness (Exx 233, 234, 237), again emphasizing that God is present and active in all reality at every moment, giving himself to each one personally. As the individual becomes progressively more aware of this active, generous divine presence, his stance becomes one of humble thanksgiving. And as awareness of God's gracious presence in one's history leads to gratitude, gratitude in turn yields to still deeper levels of awareness, to new depths of openness to encounter the gracious presence and action of God in one's present and future.⁹

The objective truth of our giftedness by God is really the heart of the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23), Ignatius's presupposed world-view for a committed Christian,¹⁰ and it is also the reason for its explicit inclusion in the *Exercises*. This consideration was not originally part of the *Exercises* proper, but his experience of directing others convinced Ignatius that it needed to be brought to a point of reflective awareness, thus providing the explicit 'foundation' for what is to follow. In this sense, the first point of the Examen may be seen as a summary of the Principle and Foundation, a reminder of who one is before the living God in all the graced concreteness and uniqueness of one's personal history, and with such an awareness leading to a deepening gratitude and desire to respond in ways that are increasingly 'more conducive to the end for which we are created' (Exx 23).

The second point

The second point is to ask for grace to know my sins and to rid myself of them (Exx 43).

Having become more consciously and reflectively aware of one's self as gifted by God through the first point of the Examen, one now seeks light. For Ignatius, this is not simply an exercise guided by human powers of reflection, but rather a profound opening of one's life and spirit to the illumination of God's own spirit. Hence, Ignatius is not interested merely in gathering data, nor in an introspective preoccupation with the self; the focus *is* the self, but

the self as seen and experienced in the presence of God, the self moving toward greater authenticity as responsive to the divine initiative. Ignatius seeks that illumination which leads beyond mere information to freedom: 'to know my sins *and* to rid myself of them'.

This dual grace petitioned here — 'to know . . . and to rid myself' — both echoes the purpose of the *Exercises* as a whole (cf Exx 21) and also exemplifies an often-repeated pattern of petitioning in the *Exercises*. Knowledge, as an object of ignatian petition, is never an end in itself, but is always a means of moving to deepening freedom. One asks to know and understand precisely in order to choose more freely. Note, for example, the colloquy to our Lady in the Third Exercise on sin:

. . . that she may obtain grace for me from her Son and Lord for three favours:

- 1 a deep knowledge of my sins and a feeling of abhorrence for them;
- 2 an understanding of the disorder of my actions, that filled with horror of them, I may amend my life and put it in order;
- 3 a knowledge of the world, that filled with horror, I may put away from me all that is worldly and vain (Exx 63).

This same movement from knowledge to understanding to freedom of commitment in service is reflected in the petitions of the contemplation on the Incarnation:

This is to ask for what I desire. Here it will be to ask for an intimate knowledge of our Lord, who has just become man for me, that I may love him more closely (Exx 104).

Similarly, the petition of the Meditation on Two Standards:

Here it will be to ask for a knowledge of the deceits of the rebel chief and help to guard myself against them; and also to ask for a knowledge of the true life exemplified in the sovereign and true Commander, and the grace to imitate him (Exx 139).

These petitions become the recurring prayer patterns throughout the Second Week of the Exercises, as knowledge of Christ becomes the source of deepening illumination and the touchstone of deepening personal authenticity and freedom, for the mystery of oneself

is illuminated in the mystery of Christ as one contemplates the events of his life, seeking to 'put on the mind and heart of Christ' (Phil 2,5).

Finally, this same petition pattern is seen in the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God:

Here it will be to ask for an intimate knowledge of the many blessings received that, filled with gratitude for all, I may in all things love and serve the Divine Majesty (Exx 233).

For Ignatius, then, the petition for light is a prayer for the grace of a discerning heart, for a deepening connaturality with the Spirit and heart of Christ. Ignatius's Rules for the Discernment of Spirits help to provide some specific criteria and hermeneutical principles for identifying and interpreting the action of God and the enemy (i.e., the Two Standards as existentially experienced in one's own life), to detect the subtle interplay of grace and selfishness that weave into the fabric of one's response to the grace-gift of God.

The third point

The third point is to demand an account of my soul from the time of rising up to the present examination. I should go over one hour after another, one period after another. The thoughts should be examined first, then the words, and finally the deeds (Exx 43).

The two-fold grace prayed for in the second point of the Examen — 'to know . . . and to rid myself' — and its rootedness in the purpose of the *Exercises* and the petition patterns should make it clear that the review called for in the third point is not simply an informative or taxative listing of what one has done well or poorly since the last Examen time. Rather, it is a continuing search for that understanding which leads to purification of choice. 'The operative questions are: what has been happening in us, how has the Lord been working in us, what has he been asking of us. And only secondarily are our own actions to be considered'.¹¹

Thus, rather than an introspective, moralistic preoccupation with self, this review is primarily a focus on the 'epiphanies'¹² of God, those often subtle yet persistent ways in which the divine seeks to reveal itself in and through one's experiences. The uniqueness of

one's own life-situation provides the setting for this review, the graced context of personal encounter with the Lord, and translates the images of the *Exercises* into here and now reality: e.g., one seeks to understand, to see more clearly in the concreteness of this time-period how the Lord has been calling in the 'synagogues, villages and towns' of one's own world of experience, and whether one has been 'deaf to his call' or 'prompt and diligent to accomplish his most holy will' (Exx 91). How has one's life progressed in that characteristically ignatian movement from knowledge to love to service (Exx 104)? How has the drama of the Two Standards continued to be played out in one's life, and how have choices and actions surfaced attitudes and subtleties of response as in the Three Classes of Men and the Three Degrees of Humility (Exx 149-157; 165-168)? The very pattern of reflection suggested by Ignatius (thoughts, words, deeds) is not so much meant to suggest a formally structured approach as the pattern of consideration in the contemplation of the Second Week. Rather it points to the human experience (cf Exx 106,107,108). What does the totality of one's life-experience say in response to God?

For Ignatius, the recognition of patterns in one's experience as a means to achieving greater freedom is reflected quite clearly as a central concern of his Rules for Discernment of Spirits, especially those of the Second Week. He exhorts the retreatant to 'observe carefully the whole course of our thoughts . . . beginning, middle and end . . .' (Exx 333), to trace their progression, to note the connections, to become more familiar with the subtleties of one's characteristic snares and delusions (cf Exx 344). Ever rooted in experience, Ignatius takes care that nothing be lost, that one learn from experience, even the experience of temptation, sin and infidelity. All is potentially a rich source of that knowledge and understanding which leads to deepening freedom and growing capacity for commitment to the Lord who calls. Hence, the importance of this type of reflection for Ignatius. One makes progress as one becomes more subtle, more nuanced in hearing/interpreting the language of one's inner movements: the patterns, the recurring themes, issues and images — those characteristic ways one is moved by God, self, the enemy.

Accordingly, though the focus is the self, it is not an irretrievably interior focus: it is on self as becoming more authentic under the impulse of God's gracious activity, the self as responsive to the

divine initiative towards companionship in service. The Principle and Foundation¹³ provides Ignatius's implicit definition of the authentic human person as one who is free, but free precisely in order to respond, to commit oneself in relationality, in a mutuality of love. And so the heart of this review is an effort to answer the questions: how has one responded to that divine love which seeks to share itself in mutuality (Exx 231)? And how have the concrete details of one's life authenticated one's love by drawing it beyond words to more fruitful action (Exx 230)?

The fourth point

The fourth point will be to ask pardon of God our Lord for my faults (Exx 43).

The movement through the first three points of the Examen — from memory of God's gracious gifts, to prayer for deeper and more sensitive awareness, to seeing in one's most recent history the action of the Lord — inevitably leads to a deepening experience and awareness of the inadequacy of one's response to the initiative of the Lord who seeks to be present and who calls into union and companionship in service. Hence, the fourth point: to seek forgiveness.

The ignatian attitude towards the recognition of one's sin and responsibility in the sin of the world is perhaps best and classically reflected in the famous colloquy of the First Exercise of the First Week (Exx 53). Note here, as seen above in the third point of the Examen, that the focus is *first* on the Lord ('Imagine Christ our Lord . . .') *secondly* on the self as responsive ('I shall also reflect upon myself . . .'). The grace Ignatius would have the retreatant seek in the First Week of the Exercises — in which he reflects on the mystery of sin in the world and in one's personal life — is the experience of oneself as a 'loved sinner'. Thus, the retreatant sees himself as he is, in his sin, and yet the love of God ever remains as the all-pervasive context in which we 'live and move and have our being' (Acts 17,28), calling each one beyond his own sinful inadequacy into a companionship of service (Exx 95). Hence, for Ignatius, reflection on one's sins is never meant to trap one in a morbid guilt that focusses simply on the inadequacies of self, but rather is intended to point all the more insistently in awe and

wonder (Exx 60) and thanksgiving for the merciful love of the Lord (Exx 61,71). Always, the focus is on the Lord's love which draws one beyond who and where one is in one's sinfulness. And for Ignatius it is precisely the contrasting polarities of sin and grace that truly reveal the depths of this love: we know the Lord's love as the utterly free gift that it is to the extent that we also understand our sin, our personal place in the history of sin, and all this against the backdrop of the continuing, unwavering fidelity of God's love.

Thus, in contemplating the Passion, the costliness of our forgiveness, Ignatius continues to focus on the Divine Lover, pouring himself out to the fullest degree, seeking ever to draw us into union and companionship. The Third Week of the Exercises emphasizes the utter totality of the Incarnation, the radical depth of Christ's identification through love with all that comprises the human condition. His additional directives, which he suggests be persuasive themes throughout the contemplations on the Passion, reflect this same awareness and emphasis: 'Consider what Christ our Lord suffers in his human nature, or . . . what he desires to suffer' (Exx 195) and 'consider how the divinity hides itself . . .' (Exx 196). Again, Ignatius underscores the radical totality of this love which seeks to share itself in identification with the loved one (cf Exx 231).

Ignatius is concerned, then, that the retreatant come to a deeply personalized, experiential awareness of being saved here and now by the active love of Christ. And, as absolutely everything for Ignatius is oriented towards service, 'this experience of salvation leads most naturally to the desire to share with others the "good news"', to do something for this Christ who has done so much for me; it leads . . . to a desire to be a disciple, to follow Jesus'.¹⁴

The fifth point

The fifth point will be to resolve to amend with the grace of God (Exx 43).

For Ignatius, gratitude is the stepping-stone to love, and love seeks always to express itself in deeds (Exx 230). Hence, this concluding step of the Examen prayer is focused towards the future and its choices, decisions, postures and attitudes in embodying this love.

How does one look to the future now, in light of this process of reflection? As in the second point it was noted that the prayer for light was not simply for knowledge of its own sake, but 'to rid oneself' of faults, for new action in freedom, one now looks to the future with specific decisions and choices to be made, with resolutions that embody new attitudes and purified choices.

This commitment to the future (as one's recollection of favours received and faults committed in points one and three) must be specific and concrete if it is to be real. How will one's life continue to live out ever more authentically the vision of the Principle and Foundation (Exx 23), the Call of the King (Exx 91), the drama of the Two Standards (Exx 139)? How, concretely, will the Three Degrees of Humility (Exx 165-168) and the Three Classes of Men (Exx 149-157) continue to reflect and illumine one's stance before the Lord? These questions must be answered in concrete, particular ways to the extent possible. That is, this step of the Examen seeks to de-romanticize and to concretize choices, promises, decisions. At times there will of course be obvious and specific choices that need to be faced; at other times, perhaps, the decision may be for a subtle change in attitude or a renewed commitment of effort to be more aware, more grateful.

As the Examen has begun with awareness of one's life as immersed in the presence of God, so now — having prayed for light, reviewed one's past responses, and sought that forgiveness which leads to renewal of commitment — one prepares to enter again that real world of experience and action, but with a newly heightened sense of the divine action, and a greater depth of human freedom for authentic response. So, in a progression of Examen reflections, the future towards which one looks in this Examen becomes the graced past of one's next Examen, as one strives to continue to 'find God in all things'.

Conclusion

The whole point of the Examen is to heighten and deepen one's experience of this God one has found. Though presented by Ignatius as a form of personal prayer — to be engaged in twice daily for a quarter of an hour — the Examen is not a 'private' exercise in the sense of promoting an excessively individualistic, 'me and Jesus' kind of piety. In the ignatian view, attention to one's interiority is not an end in itself, but is for a more authentic

self-giving in service and ministry. One moves *ad intra* in order to move more freely, authentically *ad extra*: everything, for Ignatius Loyola, is oriented toward apostolic action; towards a continuing purification of choices for greater service in a response of love to the divine initiative. And so it was in the changed and changing circumstances of his age, and in the constant flow of diverse experiences that comprise a life of active ministry, that Ignatius sought to find God — not in a monastic withdrawal from the world and from activity. This prayerful reflection sought precisely to create those sensitivities which enabled an active religious to be more genuinely, freely active in God's service, to 'find God in all things', and to be a 'contemplative even in action'.

NOTES

¹ Rule 3, Summary of the Constitutions, 1599, excerpted from *The Constitutions of the Society of Jesus* (no 304), *Rules of the Society of Jesus* (Woodstock, Md., 1956).

² Ignatius Loyola *Spiritual Exercises* (no 230). Hereafter, all references to the *Exercises* will be included in the text, citing the numbered paragraphs of the edition of Louis Puhl, S.J., (Westminster, Md., 1954).

³ Cf Schmitt, Robert L.: 'Ignatian mysticism: a mysticism of action', *Journal of Dharma* 4 (1979), pp 126-142.

⁴ Brou, Alexandre: *La spiritualité de Saint Ignace* (Paris, 1928), p 23, cited in Mary Hugh Campbell: 'The particular Examen — touchstone of a genuinely apostolic spirituality', *Review for Religious* 30 (1971), p 775.

⁵ Stierli, Josef: 'Ignatian prayer: seeking God in all things', *Ignatius of Loyola: his personality and spiritual heritage, 1556-1956*, edited by Friedrich Wulf (St Louis, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), p 162.

⁶ Cf for example: Collins, Raymond F.: *Models of theological reflection* (Lanham, Md., 1984); Hug, James E.: (ed.), *Tracing the Spirit: communities, social action, and theological reflection* (New York, 1983); Whitehead, James and Eaton, Evelyn: *Method in ministry* (New York, 1980).

⁷ Cf Dulles, Avery: 'St Ignatius and the jesuit theological tradition', *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 14 (March, 1982), p 2. Also, cf Egan, Harvey D.: *The Spiritual Exercises and the ignatian mystical horizon* (St Louis, The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1976).

⁸ Cf Buckley, Michael J.: 'The contemplation to attain love', *The Way Supplement* 24 (1975), pp 92-104.

⁹ Cf *Exercises* no 234, Ignatius's famous '*suscipe*' prayer, the fruition of such an awareness deepened through the experience of the four weeks of the Exercises.

¹⁰ Rahner, Hugo: *Notes on the Spiritual Exercises* (Woodstock, Md., 1956) p 294.

¹¹ Aschenbrenner, George A.: 'Consciousness Examen', *Review for Religious* 31 (1972), p 18.

¹² Cf Araoz, Daniel: 'Positive Examination of Conscience', *Review for Religious* 23 (1964), p 622.

¹³ Cf *Exercises* no 21. What is articulated here is Ignatius's goal for the Exercises, a vision which informs not only the Principle and Foundation, but each succeeding exercise of the Exercises.

¹⁴ Barry, William A.: 'The experience of the First and Second Week of the Spiritual Exercises', *Review for Religious* 32, (1973), p 107.