

The Examen

Deepening our Consciousness of God

presented by

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Introduction

At the conclusion of every Mass, we receive a blessing that we might go forth in peace to love and serve the Lord. But how do we discern God's will for us in the course of our everyday lives?

What guides us?

What guides us? Certainly, some helps include: 1.) God's word in Scripture, for one; 2.) another is the guidance and teaching of the Church; 3.) and still another is our own attention to the presence of God in our daily lives and being sensitive to the movement of the Holy Spirit in and around each one of us, moment by moment, day by day. I am focusing on this third source of guidance this evening by speaking about a form of prayer known as the examen; one that helps us to attend to the movement of the Holy Spirit who is alive and well among us this day and every day.

I'd like to begin by sharing, with you, something of my own adventures in faith. Here's a poem.

Lessons in Grace

I wanted to learn how to pray
so I climbed a mountain
to watch red-tailed hawks
because they make prayer look easy
as they open their wings
to air that can't be seen
and risk everything
for the sheer joy of sailing
upon the sky.

Those red-tails passed before my eyes
without flapping their wings
or using any power of their own
but tipped toward me flirtatiously
and made me wonder
if a case might possibly be made
for peace on earth
or, maybe even love.

Such risky ventures are the stuff of peace and love.
The soul is tender and wounds
can draw convincing shadows over light
fixing a soul firmly in darkness
bearing down with the weight of an anchor
more suitable for a cargo ship
than for a spirit that is supposed to be free.

But our hearts are encoded with memory
of the place from whence we've come.
The image of God.
We are of Love.
We are meant for Love
even more than hawks
are meant to fly.

Seeing them soar
I remembered
the reason I was born.
And how I came to be.

Why am I Catholic?

Often, I wonder why I'm Catholic. I must tell you right here at the outset that I am not given to blind faith, and there are many beautiful faith traditions present on this good earth which hold certain appeal. Plus, it isn't easy being Catholic. The exclusion of women from our Church's hierarchy troubles me greatly, and I do find some of the Church's teachings hard to swallow. Every day, though, I return to Catholicism because our faith is so richly and deeply and inextricably rooted in that which nourishes and sustains me like nothing else does; the Eucharist. The more I serve as a Eucharistic Minister, the more profoundly changed I am by the experience of cradling the Body of

Christ in my arms and handing Him to those who come to remember Him and to honor Him and to receive Him, too. As presented in the Gospel of Matthew, "...Emmanuel,'... 'God with us.'" (Matthew 1:23) Alive and well.

It is the Incarnation that tugs at my heartstrings and confounds my mind and wraps itself around my soul; such that the idea of finding God in all things is that toward which I am particularly drawn. In the words of Meister Eckhart (1260-1329), the German theologian, philosopher and mystic of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, "We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born." How true! My first spiritual director and now dear friend, Sr. Jewel Renna, C.N.D., often reminds me, "God is found in the reality of life. Brenda, you have to find God in the mess." How annoying is that! But so true. I have come to trust Sr. Jewel's wisdom implicitly, because I know her well. I'm coming to trust God more and more all the time as I come to know Him, too. And if ever I am to live out the gift of the Mass, to "Go in peace to love and serve the Lord", then I have to be willing to roll up my sleeves and find God wherever He or She may be.

Easier Said Than Done

Going "in peace to love and serve the Lord", I find though, is easier said than done. Thank goodness those words are fortified by the blessing at the end of Mass in which they are delivered! There is much to be done in this hungry and thirsty world to which God invites you and me to bring Christ to birth and, thereby, transform the world. Left to my own devices, I haven't a clue as to what to do or how to proceed, and, on my own, I lack the guts to enact God's will even if I did.

In my better moments, I dare to ask: Just what is it that God wants of...uh...um...of...of...of ME? And it has been my experience that once I've mustered the courage to ask the question, I'm pretty well committed to following through. Well, at least most of the time.

For all of the institutional Church's challenging teachings as well as her shortcomings (not to mention my own!), I have always been grateful for her strong stance in defense of life. At our best, we Catholics have much for which to be proud because we have dedicated ourselves to promoting and sanctifying life. We are good stewards of the earth. We care for one another, too. We feed those among us who are hungry, we heal those who are sick, we clothe our brothers and sisters who are naked, we bury our dead, and we teach. We visit our neighbors when they are imprisoned. We stand with Jesus' friends—who are our friends, too!—who are marginalized, and we break down oppressive structures while we heal their insidious effects; always, always, always protecting and dignifying life from the precious moment of conception clear through to natural death. When we speak on difficult and divisive matters such as protection of the most vulnerable among us, we do so—and we must do so—, as San Francisco's Archbishop Emeritus John R. Quinn explained in a recent article in *America* magazine, "with courtesy and clarity about why the protection of the unborn

is a requirement of human rights and not their diminishment.”¹ We are kind. And we forgive—even when forgiving is impossible. We love. We love when loving is easy. And, we love when we are tempted to run away. By the grace of God, we pray for people who have cut into our hearts and minds and souls with lethal bullets and pointed daggers and jagged knives. We wage peace. We wage peace. At our best, the Eucharist abides in our bones and we have the courage to wage peace. After all, that’s why Jesus came; to pour Grace into the world so that we—you and I—“...might have life and have it more abundantly.” (John 10:10)

But still, how do I know if I’m on the right track or not? How *can* any one of us know?

Two Questions

At the crux of the matter is our attention—or lack thereof—to the movement of the Holy Spirit. Attending to this movement of the Spirit in and around each one of us comes down to two questions.

For what moment today am I most grateful?

For what moment today am I least grateful?

Our reflection upon and our answers to these two remarkably simple questions allows us to become aware of that which is life-giving for each of us and for us all, and that which is less than life-giving. I ask myself these two questions, daily. In having this conversation at the core of my being, I engage in an examination of my consciousness of God; identifying moments of consolation and moments of desolation. This process, central to Ignatian spirituality, is called the examen. You can do this, too. Perhaps you already do.

Dennis, Sheila, and Matthew Linn, S.J. have prefaced their book on the examen, entitled *Sleeping With Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (1995), with this story.

During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, “Today I ate, and I will eat again tomorrow.”²

I can’t help but think that within the very cockles of each of our hearts, we, too, long to hold fast to that which gives us life; to hear God’s voice and to be guided by God’s hand—the Author of and the Bread of Life.

¹ Quinn, John R. (August 31-September 7, 2009). The Public Duty of Bishops. *America*, 201(5), 18.

² Linn, D., Linn, S.F., & Linn, M. (1995). *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life*. New York: Paulist Press, 1.

Discernment

In order to discern—to see and hear and know—how God is speaking through daily life, it helps me to recall how the examen came to be, and to keep my spiritual director’s guidance in mind on this matter of discernment. So I’ll share with you a brief summary of the life of St. Ignatius as well as the handy tips The Reverend John Michalowski, S.J. has given me.

St. Ignatius of Loyola

In, *My Life with the Saints*, (2006) The Reverend James Martin, S.J. provides a synopsis of the life of St. Ignatius. By all accounts, Ignatius of Loyola, born in 1491 in the Basque Country of Northern Spain, grew to become a valiant soldier and a quite a ladies man. Ignatius “describes himself in his short autobiography as ‘a man given over to the vanities of the world,’ particularly concerning his physical appearance.”³ But that’s not the end of his story. In 1521, he was struck by a cannonball which marked a pivotal moment in his life. While on his sickbed, he asked for some books to read. A relative supplied what she had, pious reading material, “which he took grumpily and grudgingly.”⁴

To his great surprise, the soldier found himself attracted to the lives of the saints and began thinking, *If St. Francis or St. Dominic could do such-and-such, maybe I could do great things.* He also noticed that after thinking about doing great deeds for God, he was left with a feeling of peace—what he termed ‘consolation.’ On the other hand, after imagining success as a soldier or impressing a particular woman, though he was initially filled with great enthusiasm, he would later be left feeling ‘dry.’

Slowly, he recognized that these feelings of dryness and consolation were God’s ways of leading him to follow a path of service. He perceived the peaceful feeling as God’s way of drawing him closer. This realization also marked the beginning of his understanding of ‘discernment’ in the spiritual life, a way of striving to seek God’s will in one’s life, a key concept in Ignatian spirituality.”⁵

Following his conversion, Ignatius went on to place himself and a “tight-knit group of six men” whom he eventually drew to his inner circle (including St. Francis Xavier), in the service of the Church; founding the Society of Jesus. Receiving formal acceptance for his society was difficult, though, at least in part because “some in the church hierarchy were disturbed that he was not founding a more traditional religious order, with an emphasis on common prayer and a stricter, even cloistered, community life. But Ignatius’s men (derisively called ‘Jesuits’ by their critics) wanted to work *in the world*.”⁶ And it is precisely the Jesuits’ inclination toward being contemplatives in action—*in* the world, but not *of* the world—that draws me to Ignatian spirituality.

I have been privileged to receive spiritual direction from wise and wonderful contemplatives in action for the past ten years or so. First, as I mentioned earlier, with Sr. Jewel, C.N.D., and for the

³ Martin, J. (2006). *My Life with the Saints*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 75.

⁴ Martin 76.

⁵ Martin 76-77.

⁶ Martin 79.

past seven years with Jesuits. They have lovingly guided me through the examen, such life-giving bread for me that I wanted to share this nourishment with you, too.

Consolation and Desolation

Most recently, Father John, S.J., my spiritual director of the last six years whom I mentioned previously, has helped me to understand **consolation** simply as that which leads me *toward* God; toward faith, hope, and peace. Conversely, **desolation** is that which leads me *away* from God; away from faith, hope and peace. He encourages me to practice the examen as a way of becoming more aware of what's going on interiorly, so as not to let myself become distracted from God's desire for me. Fr. John knows me well. I am highly distractible! Somehow, I suspect I'm not alone. The point is that if I—or we—know what gives us consolation, it makes sense for us to continue drawing closer to that which gives us life. If we are aware of our desolation, then you and I can open ourselves so as to attend to the Grace that returns us, once again, to God. We can always come home to God.

So every day, I take ten or twenty minutes—usually in the evening or sometimes when I'm out running or while I'm hiking up Talcott Mountain or at my kitchen counter chopping vegetables or making tomorrow's lunch—to reflect upon the moment of the day for which I am most grateful and that for which I am least grateful. As I am thinking back upon my day, I try to pay attention to that which led me toward faith, hope and peace—*toward* God. Likewise, I try to notice that which led me away from faith, hope and peace—*away* from God. Then, I can ask for God's grace to help me return to and hold fast to that which gives me life.

That's it. That's the raw material of my daily practice of the examen. Shall we try it?

Practicing the examen. Let's try it!

Guided Meditation

- Let's begin by lighting a candle, a symbol of divine revelation in everyday life. Would someone at each table do the honors?
- Now, you may want to focus on the candle's flame or simply close your eyes. Be comfortable. As friends, we are here together in the presence of God. Let yourself sink into this moment.⁷

✚ Take a moment to realize God's presence in your day, from the moment you awoke until this second, now. For which of these moments are you most grateful? When did you feel happiest? When did you feel most alive? When today did you have the greatest sense of belonging to yourself, to others, and to God? Give thanks to God, now, for the gifts of this day.

✚ Reflect, again, upon your day from the moment you awoke until this moment, now. Perhaps there were seconds or minutes or hours for which you were not grateful. Maybe there were difficult encounters with others. Maybe you felt frustrated or confused. Maybe there was sadness or you were in pain. Bring to God, now, that which was less than life-giving for you.

Was there anything that helped you in the difficulty or pain of this day? If so, use *this present moment* to thank God. If not, ask God to help you find Him in the trouble of this day. Ask for the grace you need.

- "Ignatius of Loyola considered this kind of examination perhaps the most important single spiritual exercise we do. His experience brought him to do it daily, and to urge all his friends to do the same."⁸

⁷ Rupp, J., & Wiederkehr, M. (2006). *The Circle of Life: the Heart's Journey Through the Seasons*. Notre Dame, Indiana: Sorin Books, 221.

⁸ Harter, M. (Ed.). (1993). *Hearts on fire: praying with jesuits*. St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 17.

Sharing

- Because it is often helpful to hear examples of graced moments in everyday life, I want you to have a chance to share, if you so desire, a grace that you recognized in your reflection this evening and to hear those of others. Keep in mind that sharing is entirely optional. Feel free to pass. Do whatever is most comfortable for you. Now, for those who would like to share, we'll take a couple of minutes, now, to give you a chance to do that at your table.

Handouts

- I have a two-sided handout that you are welcome to take. One side contains the two examen questions that I suggested tonight, as well as a list of variations on the same. You might find these helpful in your own daily prayer.
- The other side contains a list of suggestions for further reading.
 - ✚ You heard me read from the Linn's book, and from Fr. James Martin's book. In a few minutes, I'll be reading from Fr. Charles Healey's *A New Song Unto the Lord*. All of these are great reads. There's more, too.
 - ✚ Many of you heard Fr. Bill Barry speak here at St. Thomas last November on the topic of his book *A Friendship Like No Other*, and he has many more; all of which I recommend highly.
 - ✚ This little book called *Hearts on Fire* is full of gems of Ignatian spirituality.
 - ✚ I also love Joyce Rupp's and Macrina Wiederkehr's *The Circle of Life: The Heart's Journey Through the Seasons*. She does a wonderful job of highlighting grace in all seasons of the year and in all seasons of life.
 - ✚ Teilhard De Chardin's *Hymn of the Universe* is simply an exquisite work of praise to all creation.
 - ✚ Also, Mary Oliver's poetry—especially her three latest collections—contain stunningly beautiful poems which serve as fine examples of finding God in the reality of life.

- ✚ Finally, if you should be interested in making a retreat, I recommend, enthusiastically and without hesitation, Campion Renewal Center, just outside of Boston in Weston, MA.
- Campion Center offers retreats and days of prayer, all centered around helping “people enter into a closer union with the God”. (Campion Renewal Center, fall brochure, 2009)
 - Campion Center also has “many well-trained and experienced men and women” serving as spiritual directors, Fr. Barry among them. All excellent. If you are interested in pursuing spiritual direction to further your own prayer life, you’d be in good hands with the spiritual directors affiliated with Campion Center.

An experience of God

As our time together this evening draws to a close, I'd like to share a personal experience of God capturing my attention one morning here at St. Thomas, before the start of Mass. I usually serve at the five o'clock Mass on Sunday afternoon, but I happened to be serving this time on a Sunday morning when the light was just right and very nearly took my breath away.

Morning

at

St. Thomas the Apostle Church

Have you ever been there when the sun strikes
the sculptor's likeness of Him,
white Italian marble against black wood?

Have you seen how brilliant is the light
as if it weren't filtered through stained glass
or atmospheric conditions or anything at all
and how the stone softens as if the figure might be coming
to life as it is bathed in illumination
so bright that it seems as if it might be dangerous
to look but it is already too late to protect yourself
from its reflection streaming toward you,
burning through your sternum with a warmth and a gentleness
like nothing else you have ever known before in your whole life?

What do you do when you find
yourself connected to an umbilical cord of glittering, soft light
and realize that everything depends on what you decide
about this quiet force nestled intimately
along the very center of your being, now, hoping
to take up residence within its chambers
and in one split second you think it might be alright
though you know, too, that you can't ever really change your mind
because you've seen and felt
it and you'll never be able to pretend otherwise.

I almost can't help letting my heart swallow
because I have been thirsty for so long
and nothing I have ever drunk before has tasted
this sweet or satisfied
my deepest desire.

Thin Places

The Irish speak of “thin places,” places where the veil between the seen and unseen world is transparent, such that inhabitants of both worlds can momentarily touch each other; a place where it is easy to touch and be touched by God.⁹ For me, our gorgeous worship space here at St. Thomas the Apostle is one of those places where I have often felt connected with God’s presence rather strongly. I trust that you, also, have such a place--whether it is here at St. Thomas or another parish or another sacred space entirely--a place where you, too, may feel at home.

Go in peace!

Thank you for your kind attention and your participation in the practice of the examen this evening. In the words of The Reverend Charles Healey, S. J.:

Although we are a people whose final home is heaven and who wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Savior, Jesus Christ, it is to the present that we must give ourselves. It is our present tasks and responsibilities that must claim our immediate attention as we seek to love and serve the Lord. Spiritual writers have traditionally been fond of speaking of the sacrament of the present moment, and rightly so, for it is a graced moment. We can leave the past to God’s mercy, the future to His providence, and the present to His sustaining love.¹⁰

Now, may we go in peace to love and serve the Lord; each of us bringing Christ to birth and, thereby, transforming our world.

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⁹ Hines-Brigger, S. (2001 March). An Irish journey into celtic spirituality. *St. Anthony Messenger*, Retrieved August 7, 2009, from <http://www.americanCatholic.org/Messenger/Mar2001/feature1.asp>

¹⁰ Healey, C. J. (1991). *A New Song to the Lord: Hope and trust renewed*. New York: Alba House, 68.