

CONSCIOUSNESS EXAMEN:
BECOMING GOD'S HEART FOR THE WORLD



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To live contemplatively. Indeed, to become whom we contemplate: This is the invigorating experience, the hallmark enterprise and adventure that human existence is all about – that for which every human heart is longing. The magnetic appeal of the wholly beloved invites our hearts to a transformation which is never easy. But it is so intimately renewing as to be almost irresistible. It is the very heart of love. Lovers in their mutual contemplation are not always explicitly aware of this process of self-transformation into which they are being swept up. But certain challenging moments can starkly reveal the risky loss of self that is involved. And yet the very attractiveness of the beloved provides conviction and motivation to embrace this risk. In that magnetic moment, love seems an opportunity not to be missed. But love's opportunity and risk is also costly – and lovers finally know this. Indeed, the cost involved in the contemplation of lovers strikes to the profound level of self-identity. But cost what it may, the beloved's attractiveness lures the

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lover on to surprisingly new depths.

The beloved in our reflection here is Christ Jesus, our God and Lord, our Brother and, finally, all our sisters and brothers, especially the most suffering ones across all time and space (cf Mt 25/31-46). And contemplative transformation into this beloved is the fundamental process involved in, indeed it is, devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus Christ. It is also the process with which examination of conscience is concerned. And there we have at once the premise and the product of this reflection.

Both devotion to the Sacred Heart and examination of conscience have a long history in the Ignatian tradition. But they have rarely, if ever, been viewed in relationship to each another. In this article, I will try to show how regular examination of conscience facilitates a transforming experience of one's own heart into the beloved of one's heart, the Sacred Heart of God in Jesus Christ. After a brief summary of the contemporary renewed understanding of the examen, I will make use especially of some of the graces prayed for in the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises, in order to describe the continuing conversion involved in a regular practice of examen. Finally, in support of the claim that the examen can convert our hearts into devotion to the Sacred Heart of God, I will describe a little of the apostolic power, the ardent love

and thirst for justice of such a growing, and on-going conversion. On-going: for we are never done with love.

In recent years there have been attempts, both within the Jesuit heritage and within the whole Church, to renew the understanding and practice of examination of conscience and of devotion to the Sacred Heart. Examination of conscience is now more often called consciousness or awareness examen (1). In its renewed form the examen continues to bless and sensitize the hearts of many busy believers to the loving presence of God in all of daily life. And while much work has been done in developing

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a contemporary theological understanding of devotion to the Sacred Heart (2), perhaps the actual practice of the devotion is not so widespread as that of consciousness examen, or at least is not widespread among those who frequently make use of consciousness examen. This article, finally, though its central point is to relate the two practices, is concerned more with the personal effects of regular examen than it is with the details of traditional or recent developments in devotion to the Sacred Heart.

Renewed Understanding of Examen

In the renewed understanding of the examen two insights are key. First, a much more positive perspective has corrected a past view that often deteriorated into an overly negative, moralistic misunderstanding. Rather than highlighting the bad actions of a day, the examen gives primary concern to what is primary: God's revelation: a steadfast love in Christ Jesus always inviting and invigorating our consciousness. Formal examen sensitizes our hearts to the presence of this love in the ordinary details of every day. Whenever this love is recognized and responded to, our hearts simply must come alive with joy and gratitude. So gratitude is the major element in the actual time of examen-prayer, as it should also be in our daily lives of faith. And this gratefulness for the wonder of God's love stirs hearts to action. And so gratitude becomes the chief motive from which all ministry pours.

As the examen begins to make our hearts more aware of God's perduring love, we also begin to recognize how often and how easily we can be oblivious to that love, or how subtly, yet quite stubbornly, we can refuse

response to love. This realization, when faced honestly and not rationalized away, can, whether rudely or quietly, awaken our hearts with healthy guilt, with sorrow and repentance. As this article will develop later, this experience of guilt

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and sorrow is anything but pleasant; yet, as an experience of God's love, it does purify us, it does transform us. And the effect of that can only be a bolder, freer, more wide-ranging apostolic service. Mature faith and discipleship cannot happen without this painful transformation in the humiliating experience of guilt and sorrow. As the repentant sinner encounters God's forgiveness in Jesus, sorrow is transformed into hopeful, vigorous gratitude - and a burning zeal to serve God's loving justice in our world. In this way, thanksgiving the central driving force in the heart of any mature disciple of Jesus Christ - dominates the daily examen and fuels its impulse toward loving action.

A second Insight that renews our understanding of the examen is the importance of the informal examen, as distinguished from, though obviously not unrelated to, the formal examen (3). The formal examen is a specific time and style of prayer. In a previous article I described the five traditional elements of such prayer (4). Never meant as an end in itself, this formal practice of examen should gradually spill over and infiltrate itself, as a special faith-sensitivity, into a person's daily life. And so we come upon the informal examen: a way of living. The informal examen is more a matter of who we are and who we are becoming, whereas the formal examen is a specific prayer we regularly practice. Thus a regular practice of examen can lead to that self-transformation which makes possible a genuine faith-sensitivity of heart, a dynamic connaturality with the Beloved, which we are calling here informal examen. This dynamic development of formal examen into informal, into a pervasive faithsensitivity of heart, is crucial - crucial both to a proper understanding of examen itself and to its role in the human heart's deeply desired experience of love: our becoming whom we contemplate.

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Daily Conversion in Faith

Jesus' ministry erupts publicly among the people in a great sense of urgency: a wholly new revelation of God's love and the need for reform of mind and heart, if one is to recognize and respond to that love. It is so clear at the beginning of Mark and in the synagogue scene of chapter four in Luke. This radical personal conversion of faith is often described in the scriptures as a matter of repentance. As a conversion that will cost a whole lifetime, it continually involves the risking and sacrificing of a temptingly attractive but false, illusory self while radically true and radiantly new creation is born in a person's daily response to the quiet urgency of God's love. But no experience of merely passing excitement will suffice for this.

Nor can such repentance and radical change of outlook ever be reduced simply to our own planning and control. A strategy of clear-sighted tactics and of fierce determination will always prove futile all by itself. In fact, if not properly motivated and accompanied by grace, it can actually corrupt the very adventure of faith into something unwholesome and unholy. Without a genuine experience of the wonder of God's love, the Gospel call, the call by grace and favor to radical change cannot be heard, and healthy repentance cannot happen (5). It is the attractive beauty and power of God's love which reveals the inadequacy and sinfulness of our condition and unloosens in our hearts a desire to be much more than what we now may be. It is in this way that the wonder of God's love reveals our sinfulness. And this profound truth, so capable of being misunderstood, is always the bedrock of mature spiritual life. God alone sees our sinfulness most clearly for what it truly is: a choice against love. And it is this God who calls us to intimacy in the beautiful revelation of Jesus come among us as forgiveness. Every detail of Jesus' life, most especially his dramatic experience on

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Calvary, stretches and stirs our hearts in hope for a new creation, a new life, a whole new self. But repentance with its purifying pain and suffering, is the only way to this urgently longed-for or newness.

An honest repentant acknowledgement of sinfulness in the face of such love is neither obvious nor easy, because it cuts our consciousness in humiliation. The guilt and shame and the embarrassment that come in the Wake of such an acknowledgement sting and sting our consciousness. In the presence of such love, they make our spirits blush. The pain and hurt will, most often, and

quite spontaneously, make us wary and seek to activate defense mechanisms such as the rationalizations of denial and the distractions, not of joy, but of pleasure. These are moments for careful discernment in the life of any believer. For the humiliating pain of acknowledged sin, as intended here, is not the result of some overly scrupulous conscience. Nor is it the unhealthy guilt of self-hatred. Rather it is the purifying consolation - not desolation, but consolation, however, scouring - the consoling experience of God calling us to greater love and life and faith. Despite the pain, therefore, this repentant blush of heart is a grace not to be rejected. It is essential to any mature faith, to any measured zeal for God's world, to any discipleship that hopes to brave the road's full distance.

The guilt that introduces our embarrassed, repentant response to God's great, tender love requires a brief description here. Much past experience of unhealthy guilt has understandably provoked the over-reaction against, even to the point of a dangerous disregard of, all guilt as if all guilt were unhealthy. Though unhealthy guilt can surely plague and dishearten us, yet there is a guilt born of God. And it stings. But for the lover, it also signals the Beloved's presence, a very active presence, a redemptive consciousness, inviting greater intimacy in faith with

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God. Unhealthy guilt is always anxious, worried about self, in excessive fear of punishment, preoccupied with failure, at times verging on despair in the face of some unrealistic perfectionism. But healthy consoling guilt is always the result of an interpersonal love relationship. And it focuses the heart beyond the self, on the Beloved, in painful sorrow for the wound one's lack of love has caused. Healthy guilt does not despair, nor does it disrupt the deepest peace of the soul. The reason for this is that healthy guilt is always intimately and very positively related to encounter, a repentant sinner's encounter with God's forgiveness revealed and available now in a crucified Son's intransigent love.

In The Dying, A New Life

But in the tense struggle of this inner guilt, shame and sorrow, we usually become aware of the risk and high stakes involved. A self, or some aspect of a self with which we have been enamored, perhaps for a long time, must be let go of. Something must die if the new is to be born. It is a mortifying

experience, but as it is not a mortification simply of our own making neither can the outcome of it be clearly grasped in advance. It is a moment of perceived high risk. And the helplessness of such a moment, when we are on the verge of letting go of what used to be and are not yet in possession of what will be, can profoundly daunt and agitate our spirit. Furthermore, it is in no way simply our own power and ingenuity that will create a different future. In the helpless and sorrowful awareness of our sinfulness, it is only an act of trusting abandonment of self, sometimes done in the dark aloneness of faith, that will allow the Beloved to gift us with God's holiness, our only true human future. A process of conversion that has begun in love leads now to even greater love as a beloved God, in that faithful

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promise which is the risen Jesus, defies all darkness and rejects absurdity and pain as the final word, whether about this world or the next.

The heart of God revealed in Jesus excites our hearts with the invitation to a new and brighter future. But only a heart scoured clean in the humiliation of repentance can respond to that invitation. The issue is as profound as self-transformation and as hopeful as a wholly new creation. But without a mortified response to God's loving invitation and without a risky letting go of self, such a future remains simply. tantalizing, cheap grace, illusion.

The forgiving love of God brings the process of repentance to a conclusion of lively gratitude, profound joy and enthusiastic zeal for ministry. The sorrow of a forgiven sinner is not depressing, however painfully purifying. Neither is this sorrow obliterated by the joyous gratitude and zeal for service that realized forgiveness brings. Rather, the humility of a saved sinner, while not destructively focused on the past, never simply forgets the sorrowful memory of forgiven sin. One cannot help but wonder whether Peter in the maturity of his joy, during his after-breakfast walk with the risen Jesus did not once again find his eyes well up with tears as three awkward questions burned his soul with his own lonely truth, but burned it precisely for the sake of fidelity, the journey in companionship, and, yes, for the great holiness of Peter that lay ahead (Jn 21/15-19).

The new self created in God's forgiveness is always strongly characterized by a profound, joyful thanksgiving for a deed neither deserved nor capable of accomplishment on one's own. This deed of forgiveness and the hope of a

new and better future resonate strongly in the repentant sinner's heart, now riveted on the challenging beauty of God's forgiving love, found fleshed forever in Jesus on the Cross. And so the whole dynamic of the First Week of the Spiritual Exercises propels a person to confrontation,

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to enlightenment and encouragement before this passionate experience of Jesus on Calvary. Having taken upon himself the sins of all, this Son, anguished in an olive grove over the agonizing prospect of a humiliating death, is able to renew that trusting abandonment of self which allows him to find once again, as always, not previous to, but in the very abandonment of dying, his dear Father. And his beloved Father blesses this anguished abandonment with a future of absolute fullness in Resurrection. In the face of such enlivening abandonment on Jesus' part, we can find the graceful encouragement needed for that surrender of self which repentance always demands.

It is at this moment that the graces of fidelity and perseverance take root in the forgiven sinner's experience. And so Jesus' death into the future of Resurrection stands faithfully, for all ages, as God's forgiveness. It gives graceful encouragement to all repentant sinners in this risky and humiliating process of self transformation. The persevering faithfulness of this new creation, this new heart, will always depend on how profoundly, how pervasively transformed the repentant sinner is in the encounter with God's Word of forgiveness.

As we gaze on God's forgiveness in Jesus crucified, besides a lively gratitude and profound joy, our heart knows the expansiveness of a great desire for God in Jesus - an apostolic desire to give ourselves as Jesus did in the ministry of God's forgiving justice. This desire at the end of the First Week continues to expand as the attractiveness of God's love in Jesus is revealed through the remaining weeks of the Exercises. God's Spirit and Kingdom revealed so compellingly in Jesus become our wholehearted desire. To live in daily imitation of Jesus, to serve as an apostle in whatever way God desires, becomes the very energy of our hearts. And yet, as the experience continues, this desire can stretch our hearts still further: we may be so transformed, we may, in such transformation,

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.be so intimately identified with Jesus, that we become and, in the thoroughly real' way that the mysticism of Baptism and Eucharist accomplish in us, we may be Jesus in and for our world. And so the joyous thanksgiving of a forgiven sinner, so much more than a mere devotional satisfaction, sets our heart afire with such desire for new identity in Christ Jesus that we become mystical activists, heralds everywhere to the good news of God's transforming forgiveness.

This reflection offers the view that consciousness examen may play a role of special importance in facilitating such a process of radical conversion. The profundity and pervasiveness of the transformation spoken of will depend in large measure on a regular practice of examen. And rather than putting a clear conclusion to the process of radical conversion, the Exercises provide enlightening direction for the further and continual deepening of desire for this daily identification with Jesus. For this reason, as the formal Exercises conclude and move to become daily life, we are always left with an even greater need than before for regular examen, that we may continue the daily discernment of God's love converting us steadily into Christ Jesus our Lord.

Goal of Examen: Devotion to Sacred Heart of God in Jesus

Long after the retreat experience of the Exercises is finished, regular examen keeps our heart sensitive and responsive to the attractiveness of the Sacred Heart of God in Jesus. As we have already seen, thanksgiving and sorrow are the two chief affections in faith of the examen - and the sorrow itself, as we have also seen, finds, its fulfillment in thanksgiving. And so it is in and through its term of thanksgiving that regular examen mediates our conversion and growth into Christ Jesus.. Through the basic thrust of the examen each believer becomes

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a concrete embodiment here and now of the Sacred Heart of God in Jesus. Consciousness examen, therefore, by facilitating the transformation whereby a serious believer and disciple becomes devoted to the Sacred Heart is

profoundly related to that same devotion. For in this sense of the word, devotion refers to the fundamental shape and orientation of a believing heart to the Heart of God in Christ Jesus. And this sense of devotion cuts far beneath - It does not necessarily deny but rather must root -any specific, traditional devotional details and practices.

The transformation of self whereby our hearts radically become devotion to the Sacred Heart accomplishes some perceptible results in our lives. Growing Integrity of heart, wholeheartedness, Ignatian magnanimity gradually centers, unites and identifies our whole person and presence in the world. A white inner stillness, fanned to burning flame in God's own creative love, radiates an energy of recollection - a collectedness - that can meld our often fragmentary faith into the strong, live organism of a life decisively for God.

Such wholeheartedness first gives enlightenment, then courage, towards a fundamental desire and choice in the direction of the "heavenly" things of consolation and away from the "earthly" things of desolation. These desolate "earthly" things live in our flesh as the seven capital, selfish impulses toward sin that the Christian tradition has known so well for centuries. Whereas the "heavenly" things of God's consoling love are the opposite impulses which also live in our consciousness where the Spirit of Jesus invites and breathes their confirmation, their development in us, as virtues, as the very shape of our heart. In the interweaving complexity and tangle of our daily consciousness we discover that the tempting experience of these capital impulses to sin is precisely the battlefield upon which the fidelity of our commitment and devotion to the virtuous heart of God in Christ is

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tested and strengthened. And so it is usually by standing strong against the tempting intensity of lust that the virtue of chastity grows. It is by decisively acknowledging and carefully standing against the violence of desolate rage that the tensile strength of non-violent gentleness is forged. And so of all the personal and community motions of spirit that impel us towards or away from the justice of the Reign of God. The examen is daily involvement In this process of transforming the impulsive desolations of our consciousness into the deep, consoling devotion and virtue of God's.' Sacred Heart. Once again, as described earlier in this article, we notice that it is precisely in the dying

that the new is born. And what is newly born through these mortifying struggles on the inner battlefield of our heart - the heart of each of us and the communal, societal heart of each group, each social structure -always affects apostolic presence in the world, always affects decisively actions for or against God's justice as revealed in the loving Heart of Jesus.

Finally, this conversion into the Sacred Heart of God in Jesus, this process of our becoming devotion to the Sacred Heart, does not displace our weakness with an arrogant sense of our own strength. No, just the opposite! Maturity in faith is always growth to grateful realization both of our weakness and of our dependence on God's love for everything. A steadfast belief in God's love does not replace human weakness. Rather, it helps us patiently to wait upon the Lord and to recognize and celebrate God's love bringing strength into our weakness. For God's power is at its best in our weakness (cf. II Cor 12/7-10). It is a power that is needed, for becoming whom we contemplate takes courage, even as it brings energy for it. It is high adventure, with a promised wage of persecution, to enter and be taken up into the affectivity of Jesus, God's counter-cultural heart for the world.

Consciousness examen, then, is not a way to greater,

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self-reliant strength. But as its daily practice transforms us into the Sacred Heart, we may become whom we contemplate and so stand in this world as living witnesses, agents of love, inviting others into God's Heart in Christ Jesus: "Come to me, all you who are weary and overburdened, and I will give you rest! Put on my yoke and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." (Mt 11/28-30).

And one more time we listen to the Beloved, becoming whom we contemplate: "This text is being fulfilled, today, even as you listen..."

"The spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives and to the blind new sight, to set the downtrodden free, to proclaim the Lord's year of favor." (Lk 4/16-21).

Through a companionship with Jesus made intimate and tender, strong and apostolically peremptory, through days and years of fidelity to the examen of consciousness, and through the dynamic energy continually released in the experience of forgiven sinfulness, we may come to the apostolic gift which the fidelity of the friends of God can know. In becoming whom we contemplate, we may, devoutly, reverently, boldly, and with his thirst for justice become, each of us and together, in the Holy Spirit, God's own heart for the world.

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N O T E S

1. George Aschenbrenner, S.J., "Consciousness - Examen", Review for Religious, Val. 31 (1972) pp. 14-21. Cf. also the lengthy, very helpful article of David Keith Townsend, S.J., "The Examen Re-Examined", CIS, Val. XVIII, 2 (1987), pp. 11-64.
2. Annice Callahan, R.S.C.J., Karl Rahner's Spirituality of the Pierced Heart - A Reinterpretation of Devotion to the Sacred Heart, (New York, 1975). This article contains references to the essential texts of Rahner on this subject.
3. George Aschenbrenner, S.J., "A Check on Our Availability. The Examen", Review for Religious, Val. 39 (1973) pp. 321-324.
4. Art. Cit., Review for Religious, Val 31 (1972).
5. Cf. my article "Forgiveness", Sisters Today, Vol. 45 (1973) pp. 125-192.