



ignatian  
prayer

## Communal Examen

Father George Aschenbrenner's groundbreaking article of 1972 on the "consciousness examen" led to a renewed understanding of the traditional Ignatian exercise and its dynamic role in our personal lives.<sup>1</sup> His work dealt with the *personal* examen. In recent years occasional efforts have stressed Ignatian spirituality's communal dimension. Among those efforts is the work of a group called Ignatian Spiritual Exercises for the Corporate Person (ISECP), uniting the dynamic of the Exercises with insights of group facilitation.<sup>2</sup> Also, an entire issue of *The Way Supplement* was devoted to communal discernment.<sup>3</sup> John English SJ's book *Spiritual Intimacy and Community* deals with it.<sup>4</sup> It stresses our nature as members of a community and helps readers to reflect on discernment's communal dimension.

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*Review for Religions*

This article, however, is not about communal discernment per se; the pieces mentioned above are good starting points for that purpose. This article simply describes a "communal" examen of consciousness, an exercise based on the realization that Ignatian spirituality is applicable to communities, not just individual men and women. Where is Christ to be found in daily community living? Communities, families, organizations, and even nations can experience collective consolation or desolation, a sense of being connected with God's movements in the world or a sense of being separated from them. Spirituality is communal. Though Ignatius's definitions and rules in the Exercises apply primarily to persons' relationship with God, they are also applicable to communal situations, to persons' relationship with one another. The communal examen, then, can help the community as a group to attend to its daily life in a prayerful way.

The communal examen adapts the general examen found in the Spiritual Exercises (§§32-43). I divide this exercise into two connected parts. The first involves guiding our community prayerfully through the steps of the examen—a loving and contemplative look at our life together. The second part invites dialogue or conversation so that we share with the others our reflections on our community's life. I will refer to the parts as the guided examen and the conversational examen.

One of the attractions of the communal examen is the power of a community praying together. In an article on Jesuits and the liturgy, Robert Taft SJ, professor emeritus of oriental liturgy at the Pontifical Oriental Institute in Rome, makes a distinction between *freedom* and *obligation* in Jesuit communal prayer. He points out that Ignatius did not want his men to be obligated to

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celebrate the Hours regularly, but did want them to have the freedom to do this. He quotes a little-known text. To his secretary, Juan de Polanco, Ignatius said: “We remain free to have choir when and where it may seem to contribute to God’s greater service. Only the obligation is removed.”<sup>5</sup>

In initiating the communal examen in my community, a Jesuit novitiate, my desire was that this exercise be *truly communal*. Early in our experience, we realized that, although we called it communal, it had a personal focus. As one member said, we were sitting with the others in a quiet space and praying about the week just past, but we were reflecting more on how “I” live in the community. The difference can be subtle, but our aim in our weekly examen is to move the primacy from “oneself in the community” to “ourselves as the community.” To that end I avoided using the pronoun “I” when I led the examen.

### The Method

In our novitiate we keep the communal examen in our weekly calendar. With few exceptions it takes place each Friday morning. We look in a prayerful and discerning way at the past week and then to the week coming up. The leader prepares the examen a day or two earlier, prayerfully considering what has been happening. The leader asks himself: Where is the energy in the community? What are the Spirit’s movements? Do people in the community look tired, or are they energized and upbeat? Are they engaged, or are they withdrawing? The leader has tried to pick up the general flow of life in the community—at the dining-room table, in living-room conversations, in classes, at Mass, and so on. He does this not as an external observer, but

as one of the community. He “listens” for subtle movements; he tries to be a discerning presence in the community. (The leader should probably be the superior or some other person of authority in the group.)

We spend about forty minutes on the communal examen. The first twenty or so are devoted to the guided examen. Then, after a transitional prayer, we begin our conversation, our dialogue. The guided examen uses the five elements of traditional consciousness examens. After an opening prayer, we begin with gratitude. Adapting Ignatius’s words and making them relevant for this community at this time, the guide invites the community to “give thanks to God our Lord for the benefits [we] have received” (*SpEx* §43). He simply and prayerfully reminds us of some of the highlights (either scheduled or spontaneous) in the community’s life in the past week. After a few more guiding words, several minutes of silence follow, during which all get in touch with experiences for which they are grateful to God. The purpose of the leader’s guiding words, of course, was to jog people’s memories. Communities busy with many things may easily have forgotten some noteworthy things, or may have taken them for granted.

Next the guide again offers, as at each stage, a few guiding points or questions and then leaves the group to silence. We pray for the enlightening grace to see our week as God’s sees it and to use this time prayerfully.

Third, and probably most significantly for the com-

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munity's discernment, we look again at things we are grateful for and then we pray for awareness of where and when we, as a community, experienced consolation or desolation, union of minds and hearts, or separation and isolation. What were significant moments in the community this week? Was there a lot of internal movement in the community because of a particular event? Which events are worthwhile for the community to go back and revisit, letting God's grace shine in a new way? My practice in this third step is to be as specific as possible, especially if at some time energy *and* consolation were clearly present, or there were evident moments of desolation and a loss of energy. For instance, was there a very real source of tension in the community that week? Was there a jarring argument, or did a big public event cause concern? Did some event have a very positive and consoling effect on the community?

In the fall of 2008, the election campaign in the United States was clearly having an impact on conversations in the living room and at table. Likewise, the community was not immune to the daily news of war, terrorism, economic turmoil, and political scandal. The ministry that novices were doing one or two days a week gave Mondays and Wednesdays a distinctly different feel at table than other days. There was usually an upbeat atmosphere as the men recounted experiences from their ministries. How do we let God's grace into the things that have an impact on the life of the community? All of this is fruit for prayerful reflection together.

Our fourth step is to look at our sin as a community. That means looking to our relationships with one another or with others outside the community. It involves a look at our life as a community: Where or when are we wasteful of time or money, food or drink, electricity or

paper? Where are we avoiding others? How are we as a community not attentive to our brothers and sisters in the city around us? What effect did the negative mood of one or two of us have on the rest of us? Are we hospitable? As with the "discernment" step, it is helpful to be as specific as possible. In some areas we may know we are sinful or wonder whether we are. Perhaps a well-stocked refrigerator stands as a stark reminder of our difference from most people in the world. Or perhaps our garbage cans tell us something about our waste and the gifts we take for granted. Or maybe the fatigue and moodiness of one member has influenced all of us that week. If a community is honest, it does not take long to realize some communal sinfulness. Realization is one step. Sorrow is another.

The final step is a hope-filled look at the week coming up, in the light of what we are learning about the week just ended. From what we know about our life together—both virtue and sinfulness—is there something specific we should be especially attentive to? What special or ordinary events are coming up next week? Does anything there need special grace? What hopes and prayers do we have for next week? As with the earlier steps, here the leader offers a few guiding words and then leaves the group in silence. This much takes us about twenty minutes.

After a simple transitional prayer, we go to the second part, the conversational examen, something notably different. The leader does not guide here. The members of the community raise points and offer reflections. The

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assumption is that they have thoughtfully focused on their life together and that their remarks will be more communal than personal. Dialogue is expected. The aim of this medium of exchange is to help the community itself grow in spirit and in practice. For instance, if one person says “I am disturbed by our community’s sin of wastefulness,” the hope is that others will respond either by asking for clarification or by adding their own observations. Otherwise, an important opportunity for the community’s growth has been missed.

It is good when members recognize together how much the community has been in consolation, or desolation, in the wake of specific occurrences or choices. That can lead to shared thanksgiving and shared self-awareness (or community-awareness), or to shared sorrow for our communal sin and shared hope for the week coming up. Do we have commonly shared desires? That question may involve subtleties that are hard to communicate, but, when there is a prayerful disposition in the group, members can more easily hear one another.

### Some Other Things We Learned

What have we learned about this trial-and-error exercise? First, the setting should be a prayerful one, but not overly prayerful. We used to conduct both phases in the chapel, but found that, understandably, it did not foster conversation. We took each other’s words a little too sacredly there, and thus not communally enough. Then we tried using the chapel for the guided examen and a seminar table for the conversational section. That was all right, but it seemed too businesslike after our time in the chapel. Now we use a living room.

The weekly communal examen helps us look at how we are living together in community: things that “work”

by orienting us toward God and community, and things that lead to isolation and its attendant problems. Being a novitiate, we do that regularly anyhow, but the examen provides a prayerful setting for this to happen. It serves, in a way, as a weekly and prayerful community meeting. It offers us a chance to pray together in an easy way over the logistics and mechanics of how we actually live together.

The weekly examen needs to have flexibility built into it. A good analogy is the personal consciousness examen. That prayerful habit changes and develops over time. Likewise, the communal examen needs to grow. A community looks and acts differently after a few months of living together.<sup>6</sup> And, when new members move in, it changes and needs to develop new habits.

Let me restate the obvious. The guides need to be in tune with the movements in the community. Their guidance questions cannot be generic or rote; they have to resonate with the community. Is there an ongoing issue that needs continual attention? What issue does this community need to attend to this week? In what ways are we in harmony with God’s activity in the world? What do we need to be monitoring? Perhaps it is our tendency to overwork or overanalyze. Or are we weak at hospitality and just “wasting time” with one another and our guests? Do we neglect the playfulness or creative side of life in community? Do we mention the same discernments or the same kind or degree of sinfulness week after week? All of those things tell us something about how we are living. The communal examen needs to be adapted to this community’s uniqueness. It can be a good way of being honest with one another.

In our practice we end the exercise with a brief closing prayer. I have thought, however, that it could be



expanded. It could wrap up some of what we discussed in the second half. On the other hand, that may depend on whether the conversation has led to the resolution of something. Presumably, as time goes on, the group will deal better with issues that arise. In that regard, the hope for the communal examen is no different than people's hope that their personal praying of the examen of consciousness will help them keep growing and developing spiritually.

One caution needs mentioning. Just because a community is committed to the weekly examen does not mean that community members should store up issues till the formal exercise concludes another week. People

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should use the present moment and informal opportunities to deal with many things. The communal examen simply offers a chance to look back from the perspective of a week.

It offers another occasion to commend or affirm each other—something that can happen naturally enough all week long. It may offer a better way of dealing with patterns of behavior. It can be a time of gentle challenges to both individuals and community. It offers us the chance to take a long, loving look at our community living.

More than thirty-five years ago George Aschenbrenner said, "We are talking about an experience in faith of growing sensitivity to the unique, intimately special ways that the Lord's Spirit has of approaching and calling us."<sup>7</sup> Over the decades, we have grown to recognize the need not only for me to pray better but for us to pray together better.<sup>8</sup>

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> George A. Aschenbrenner SJ, "Consciousness Examen," *Review for Religious* 31 (1972): 14-21. Aschenbrenner wrote a follow-up article about the examen in *Review for Religious* 39 (May 1980): 321-324.

<sup>2</sup> Ignatian Spiritual Exercises for the Corporate Person (ISECP) was founded in 1977 as a joint Canadian-American project involving several Jesuits and their colleagues working to bring together some insights and methods based on merging group dynamics/facilitation with the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. It was based in the University of Scranton (Pennsylvania). The group still exists, under a new name and acronym, International Society of Community Engagement Professionals (ISCEP), based in Appleton, Wisconsin, with Judith A. Roemer OSF at the helm. Information and resources are available at [www.iscep.org](http://www.iscep.org).

<sup>3</sup> *The Way* Supplement 85 (Spring 1996), titled "Discerning Together." It offers articles by writers experienced in communal discernment. It presents a way of doing communal discernment and deals with issues such as conflict, social sin and grace, and cross-cultural communication.

<sup>4</sup> John English SJ, *Spiritual Intimacy and Community: An Ignatian View of the Small Faith Community* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> Juan de Polanco is quoted in Robert F. Taft SJ, "Liturgy in the Life and Mission of the Society of Jesus," in *Liturgy in a Postmodern World*, ed. Keith Pecklers SJ (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), p. 51.

<sup>6</sup> My experience is with a formation community that changes from year to year. The members, mostly novices, presumably change and grow amid new challenges and opportunities. The weekly examen will look a little different in a community that has more stability.

<sup>7</sup> Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen," p. 15.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the ideas in this article are from my experience of working on the Leadership Formation Programme at Loyola House, Guelph, Canada, in the 1990s. This programme was offered principally to the Waterloo Region Roman Catholic Separate School Board. I acknowledge, too, my Jesuit novitiate community in St. Paul, Minnesota, USA, with whom I have been able to put into practice the communal examen.

Questions for Personal and Group Reflection

1. In our apostolic community, how might we adopt this approach to a communal examen that Philp Shano uses within a formation (novitiate) community?
2. What are the benefits to our way of living community life if we regularly schedule a communal examen?

What are some pitfalls that we need to avoid if we regularly schedule a communal examen?

Confession

*We chase butterflies  
Fluttering fresh  
From the chrysalis of creation  
And entangle inarticulable wonders  
Of sorrow and delight  
In rough nets of words  
And pin them to the page.*

*For the presumption, Lord  
Of our faded Lepidoptera  
Unable to survive  
The trauma of their capturing  
We ask forgiveness  
Even if not promising  
Never to sin again.*

Ian A.T. White

Ignatius's *Contemplatio ad Amorem*

One of the most memorable experiences of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises is its final exercise, commonly referred to in Latin as the *Contemplatio ad Amorem*.<sup>1</sup> The title has been traditionally translated as “The Contemplation for Attaining Divine Love” or “The Contemplation to Reach Love,” which is Jesuit Joseph Tetlow’s interpretation.<sup>2</sup> Notice that neither translation mistakenly says “obtaining” God’s love, for Ignatius knows that we already are receiving that divine love in infinite abundance. Rather, in this experience Ignatius offers us a way to learn how to “reach for” and hopefully “attain” and “possess” the ability to love the way God loves. In line with this clarification, according to Jesuit George Aschenbrenner, some have suggested retitling this experience “Loving the Way God Loves.”<sup>3</sup>

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