

# **THE EXAMEN - A TOOL FOR WHOLISTIC GROWTH**

By John Govan, S.J.

As a spiritual director I have been very privileged in accompanying people on their unique journeys through the joys and pains of their lives. In these individual stories there is one common concern that keeps surfacing. It is the problem of integrating these ordinary human events with those rare moments in which the person has a real sense of God's presence. Unfortunately, these moments seem to be limited to times of prayerful activity. The greater part of their day is seen in their eyes as a time in which God is not only absent but unable to enter. This felt experience often results in some type of anxiety and frustration with daily life and an ever increasing conviction that these regular activities are an obstacle to spiritual growth. It is this need for a vision which integrates all activities in the spiritual life of an individual which has prompted me to write this article.

What follows is an attempt to be as practical as possible so that one might have at one's disposal a concrete way of growing into a vision which integrates everything that happens in one's life so that God is always seen as present and nothing is necessarily an obstacle to spiritual growth. If practiced faithfully, the daily Examen can lead to a deep and personal relationship with the Lord so that everything is understood in terms of that relationship. This type of vision is needed if spiritual and human growth are to be seen as interdependent.

The prayerful and reflective practice that is being suggested a possible way of developing a wholistic and integrated vision in which all things can lead to God is the Examen. This exercise can be explained by a consideration of three questions:

1. Why is the Examen important?
2. What is the Examen?
3. How does one do the Examen?

## **WHY IS THE EXAMEN IMPORTANT?**

Grace works upon nature. It is not simply God's grace that enables us to grow, nor is it simply our human effort. We need to be helped by God and we also need to help ourselves. The truth of our identity as



human needs to be taken by us as seriously as God takes it. We have the responsibility of bringing everything in our day before the Lord so that His grace can radically transform its meaning and significance for us. Thus our spiritual growth is also a human growth. A divine and a human component are needed. The Examen time is a definite activity which brings these two parts together so that we can fully grow in 'wisdom and age and grace' just as the Lord did.

Growth always begins from the present existing reality. Our present reality includes all the events and experience that make us the individual that we are. This means that our identity can only be truthful if it takes into account the events of the day. But our identity also includes the relationships that belong to us as creatures. These relationships are four in number: my relationship to God, my relationship to myself, my relationship to the world of things and my relationship to other people. The Examen time brings these four relationships plus the events of my day into the presence of God in such a way that God has the possibility of enlightening me.

The wholistic vision that we need is the vision of faith. But the vision of faith is the vision with which the Lord looked at the world of His time. And He had a vision which simultaneously contained both the world as it was and the kingdom of the Father which was to be built. This means for me that faith which does not have an incarnational element is suspect. All it can do is create a radical tension between our human realities and our spiritual desires. But Jesus became flesh, entered our history and redeemed us from within our own condition. If we wish to follow Jesus, we need to follow Him in this world of ours and not merely in some dreamlike world which does not exist right now.

Paul is a very good example of one who has a faith in the Resurrected Lord but acts in this world on the basis of that faith. If we reflect on his missionary activity (cf. epistles of Paul), his emphasis in the analogy of the body of which Christ is the head and we are the parts (1 Cor. 12:12-30), his conversion experience in which he was transformed from being a persecutor of the Church to an enthusiastic follower of Christ in the Church (Acts 9:1-22), we see perhaps that the Incarnation of Christ continue today. Christ is truly present in my brothers and sisters right now. At the Last Judgment, the Lord will say "I tell you solemnly, in so far as you did this to one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:40). There is a real



grounding in our faith-history for an integrated vision which eliminates any tension or opposition between the human and the divine.

In our own day, we continue to say the prayer that Jesus taught us, namely the Our Father. This seems that we often pray 'thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. Let me suggest that this is both a petition from us to God and a request from God to us. It is so implicit call for us to accept the task and the responsibility of being co-creators who by our actions build the kingdom and thus bring about the achieving of His will on earth. Jesus desired to build the kingdom of His Father, but He invites us as His disciplines to continue to build in this world. This request can appear awesome and impossible, but He gave us the Holy Spirit to empower us and to make the task possible.

Last we become centered on our deeds and not God, the Lord cautions us. "It is not those who say to me, 'Lord, Lord' who will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the person who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Mt. 7:21). It is very important to know my own motivation, and such knowledge can only become mine if the Lord brings it to my attention. The Examen allows this to happen.

A final reason why the Examen is important lies in a possible result. This practice can lead to an inner peace which cannot be severely affected by the events of one's life. It is somewhat like the peace that Paul had when he said that "nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:8). This cosmos from one who had an integrated vision of life and sees everything in terms of one's journey to God.

Before we move on to a consideration of the second question, let us recap some of the significant reasons for the importance of the Examen. It brings the fullness of our creaturehood into the presence of the Lord. It creates the real possibility of looking at our particular day with the vision of faith and growing in the ability to find God in all things. Such an ability might lead to more of an incarnational faith and concrete actions which serve to build the kingdom of God in this world. Finally, it allows us time to become prayerfully reflective and perhaps discover our true motivations.



## WHAT IS THE EXAMEN?

The basic format of the Examen as I envisage it has four steps:

- Step 1. Act of Presence.
- Step 2. Prayer for Light and Wisdom.
- Step 3. Examination, Thanksgiving, Sorrow.
- Step 4. Asking for Help for Tomorrow.

### Step 1. Act of Presence.

I begin the Examen time by placing myself in the presence of God, and preferably in the presence of Jesus. The Father has given Him all judgment (Jn 5:22) and He is the "Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6). I thus imagine myself as one of discipline on the road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35) so that I can talk with Him about my day. With His help, I perhaps can understand the deeper significance of what seemed to me like ordinary events. With His help, I can be enabled to find God in these events and thus in my day. In His light, I can understand them as an integral part of my spiritual journey to God. By the act of presence I am consciously entering into a DIALOGUE WITH JESUS and leaving behind the darkness of an introspective monologue.

The awareness within me of His presence has many different degrees of intensity. The discipline in the story of Emmaus were with Jesus all the time but only recognized Him at the breaking of the bread. But recognition did not result as a direct consequence of this action. Recognition is always His gift. So even if I fail to 'feel' His presence in the events of my day, faith can and does tell me that He was present. "Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe" (Jn 20:29). The act of presence is an act of faith.

It is true that I personally am being enlightened by the Lord whenever I am in His presence, but one needs to keep in mind how the Lord is coming into that meeting with me. He presents us with the vision of faith which includes justice, the mindest of the corporal works of mercy, the teaching of the Beatitudes, the commandments to love God and to love your neighbour, a total and unconditional love for me and a desire for me to grow into a more complete union with Him. Thus He enlightens me about my day's events in terms of this background of His



teachings. All of these are centered on building the kingdom of God on earth. So it is not just a 'Jesus and me' spiritually that is being fostered, but rather it brings me into contact with a call to greater service.

## Step 2. Prayer for Light and Wisdom.

In this next part of the Examen one asks Jesus for the gift of light so that one may see clearly and the gift of wisdom so that one might understand what one sees. These are definite petitions and remind us of our creaturehood and dependency. They create within us a stance of humility, need and childlike trust. They remind us that in the light of Christ there is no darkness and rekindle within us a desire to walk always in that light.

## Step 3. Examination, Thanksgiving, Sorrow.

Keeping myself in DIALOGUE WITH JESUS, I now prayerfully reflect on everything that happened during my day. This examination will stir up feelings of both thanksgiving and sorrow. I immediately express my feelings to the Lord. Whenever I feel comfortable in His presence while some event in my day is coming clear in my mind. I say thank you in recognition of it as a gift and thus grow in my knowledge of His presence. And whenever I feel uncomfortable in His presence with something that happened, I say I am sorry and I ask Him to enlighten me about this experience. This enlightenment allows me to turn what seems like an obstacle into a source of growth. From God's point of view, all is gift. But, from our point of view, all can become gift if and only if we bring it into the relationship we have with God and see everything as possibly leading to God. It is only when things are seen in terms of that relationship that they are truly gifts. I think this understanding can help us appreciate what Paul meant when he said "nothing can happen that will outweigh the supreme advantage of knowing Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:8). Everything can lead to growth if I have a wholistic vision which combines the human and the spiritual.

An example in which an obstacle becomes a gift for growth might help make it clear. Suppose I feel sorrow in the Lord's presence when I think about an event which I know was a good deed. Then a further reflection might make me aware that the reason I did it was simply so



that others might think well of me. I am getting in touch with my real motivation. The Lord is revealing me to me. Such self-knowledge is a major reason for the Examen.

#### Step 4. Asking for Help for Tomorrow.

As I end the Examen period, I ask the Lord to be a part of my day so that He might concretely help me grow into the fullness of my humanity by incorporating myself ever more into Him. This request for help should not be left in general terms, but rather it should be an expression of a very significant and meaningful need of mine. This requires of me a reflective awareness of my predominant desire and predominant obstacle which is related to this desire. Examples might help make this point clear.

Suppose I have a real desire to grow in love for other people but a real difficulty in accepting Charlie. Then I ask the Lord to help me grow in my love for others, especially in my love for Charlie. Or, suppose I really am seeking to grow in patience, but my children sometimes cause me to become angry. In that case, I might ask the Lord to help me be more patient, especially with my children. And if I really need to be more trusting because of a pending operation, I can ask for greater trust, especially regarding my health.

This request for help for tomorrow is very important. What is requested become the focus of my examination time the next day. For example, if I have asked for help so that I might grow in love for other people and especially for Charlie, then when I return to the Examen, I review the day in DIALOGUE WITH JESUS in terms of love for others and for Charlie. In this way I am allowing the Lord to nourish me daily so that I might actually grow to something definite. When I have a meaningful and concrete intention, the Examen practice become very important. If it is only general, it will soon be forgotten.

How does one determine what the focus and the request should be? A very practical suggestion is the following. Think of three or four things that are very important for you and your growth. Then ask yourself which of them is the most important for you right now. When you can answer this question, you have found your predominant desire. Then you need to overcome in order to realize that desire. The



combination of desire and obstacle become your focus and request when you do the Examen.

How long does one stay with a particular focus? The answer is quite simple. One stays with the same thing as long as it remains important and significant. This is the major criterion. However, keep in mind that growth is a slow process and a change in topic should only be made when there is a consistent felt need for something else. The same need might be there for a week, a month or longer. Do not change the Examen topic unless there is a good reason.

The Examen done this way becomes a tool for wholistic growth. But asking for help for tomorrow also has another benefit. It helps us live one day at a time and become more centered on the present. If we are dreaming of the future or remembering the past too much, we lose the full importance of the present moment. Growth takes place in the reality that is there right now. The Examen keeps bringing us back to the present and allows us to go into the future with the Lord at our side. It gives us a vision which helps us see God in things and persons, which gives us courage and hope, and which instills within us an eagerness and zest for future.

### HOW DOES ONE DO THE EXAMEN?

The Examen itself is a time of heightened awareness and prayerful reflection which lasts for about fifteen minutes. Before I begin, there are several things to remember. What have I been focusing on and asking the Lord to help me with? I am going into a DIALOGUE WITH JESUS. What is the mind and heart of Christ? Let us now consider an example of an Examen period. The predominant need is to find God in all things, but especially at the office.

Jesus, I want to come into your presence now. I am weary after a long day. Please walk with me! Please be patient with me! Make me aware again of how you love me and call me to be both a friend and a discipline..... Journey with me through my day and help me see where you have been.....where I missed you.....

How soon after rising my thoughts turned to you..... This certainly was your grace..... Thank you for being so good to me.



But then at the office this morning..... Something happened that was really very insignificant.....and yet, I was really annoyed..... Please help me know what happened? What caused me to react this way? Help me know.

Oh! Now I see! I had totally forgotten your call to love. I indeed was blind to your presence in those people. I really did become self-centered..... I really am sorry. Please help me next time.

This afternoon when I helped Bob at the office, I felt pretty good..... I guest good deeds do that.....I felt this way whenever I do something for someone else.....I know your grace makes this possible.....Thank you for giving me this experience.....Thank you for letting me recognize you in it.....Please help me do something like it more often.

Tonight.....the children wanted me to play with them.....I was too tired and said no.....but then I felt I should have said yes.....but I really was tired.....Should I have played with them?

You mean you are not disappointed in me for saying no to them? But you are because I feel doubts about it.....I'm a bit confused.....Please help me see.

Now I see what you mean.....How dumb I've been.....You want me to start accepting the fact that I am human and was tired.....I can't do everything..... I need to say no more often and more peacefully.....This sure is comforting to me.....to know that it's alright to be weak.....You don't know how much this means to me.....not only with respect to my children, but in all kinds of things.....I really want to thank you for this very valuable gift!

Well! It's been a long day.....but a really good one.....thanks to you.....Please help me again tomorrow.....I want to see you in more things in my day.....especially in the office which seems to be my weakest spot.....I really do trust you.....Good night, Lord.

In this example, we can see all the elements of the Examen working together. With the act of presence, the prayer for light and wisdom, the expressions of thanksgiving an sorrow and the request for help for the following day, there is a real bringing of one's daily life into God's intimate presence. By letting Him see the day, we are viewing it with the vision of faith which is absolutely necessary for an integration which brings together both the human and the divine.

My whole identity is being brought into play by this activity. Part of who I am is contained in the events of my day, and this is the central content of my reflection, but the other parts of my identity which belong to my creaturehood are also being enlightened. My relationship to God is active throughout the Examen. My relationship to others is somehow highlighted. In this example, it has been made present to awareness by dwelling on the people at the office, Bob and the children. My



relationship to the world is made clear just as the office milieu was very much a part of this examen. And my relationship to my self, that is, to my own humanity, is also brought to the surface. In the example, the person's reaction to his children was the event that resulted in the radical insight that it was alright to be weak. Notice how this understanding is essential for the development of an inner peace which does not immediately understand human weakness as a refusal to follow the Lord's call to love.

One final word seems appropriate. Since our identity is always changing and always in the state of becoming and since the events of our daily life help to bring about this dynamism, it is very important to frequently bring our present reality face to face with God. The Examen practice is most useful for achieving this encounter if it becomes a daily event. Jesus has said of Himself: "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, with me in him, bears fruit in plenty" (Jn 15:5).

