

Examining the Examen
Eight Commentators Reflect
On Ignatius' Examen Prayer

A Supplement to
Sacred Story
An Ignatian Examen for the Third Millennium

William M. Watson, S.J.

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Introduction

Eight commentators on the *Examen* will help us appraise the problems and possibilities of the *Examination of Conscience* for our day. Three principal commentators make up the substance of part one. They are chosen because of their extensive writings on the Ignatian *Examen*. Five other writers' *Examen* reflections will be considered in part two. They, like the first three, are chosen for their fidelity to the uniquely Ignatian form of *Examen*, and to add different perspectives, especially women's voices, to this analysis.¹

Matters to be explored in each writer's analysis are: (1.) the interplay between the particular and general modalities; (2.) the weight given to sin and conversion and how both are defined; (3.) a sense of the *Examen* as a discipline that encapsulates a unique Ignatian mysticism of union; (4.) the understanding of discernment in the *Examen* viz., the trajectory toward the Divine or the demonic and; (5.) personal and cultural difficulties unique to our modern context that inhibit the *Examen's* value and fruitfulness as a method of daily prayer.²

¹ Research for this project uncovered dozens of articles on the *Examen*, but not all could be classified as authentic to Ignatius and the *Ignatian Paradigm* I detailed in the first chapter. All components of this *Ignatian Paradigm* should be present for any *Examen* that wants to be identified as Ignatian. Other *Examen* modalities, while worthwhile in and of themselves, do little to advance the focus of this study on Ignatius' vision or a practice of the *Examen* consistent with its formulation in the *Exercises*.

² Combined, Aschenbrenner, Townsend and Tetlow have contributed six of the eighteen articles on the *Examen* published in *Review For Religious* since 1960. Also, Tetlow has the only issue devoted exclusively to the *Examen* in the series, *Studies*, published by the Institute of Jesuit Sources in St. Louis. Townsend has one of the three issues of *The Way Supplement* devoted exclusively to the *Examen*. His is chosen because of its specific link to the *Spiritual Exercises*.

Part One: Aschenbrenner, Townsend and Tetlow

George Aschenbrenner: The Consciousness Examen

George Aschenbrenner's article, *Consciousness Examen*, uses the Ignatian five-point structure for his daily *Examen*: prayer for enlightenment; reflective thanksgiving; practical survey of actions; contrition and sorrow; and hopeful resolution for the future. He identifies the prayer for enlightenment as a collaborative effort between the Spirit and examinee so "that the Spirit may help us see ourselves a bit more like God sees us!"³ Reflective thanksgiving invites the examinee to cultivate an attitude of innate poverty so that he can truly experience all life, even its slightest benefit, as a gift given by God. How else can one be grateful? Nothing can be taken for granted because "God will lead us to a deep realization that all is gift."⁴

Aschenbrenner's practical survey of actions is by far his longest section and enfolds his commentary on the Ignatian *PE*. The examinee is not to rush to review his actions until such time that the period from the last *Examen* has been pondered as a faith event that reveals information to the examinee: "what has been happening in us, how has God been working in us, what is being asked of us."⁵

Aschenbrenner uses the *PE* to open the examinee to "listening" how God is inviting conversion in some particular area of the heart. He indicates it is usually an area that the person would rather avoid, knowing as he or she does, on some deep intuitive level, that change, metanoia, in this *one* aspect is necessary.

After listening to his heart and pondering what God is doing and how one is being invited to conversion in some *particular* way, the examinee seeks forgiveness. Aschenbrenner conceives the sorrow and contrition of the forgiveness sought as springing from the examinee's lack of courage and honesty before God in the specific area of conversion most central to his growth in Christ. No trace of shame or depression due to personal weaknesses should be present in this experience, because, as

³ George Aschenbrenner, SJ "Consciousness Examen," *Review for Religious*, no. 31 (January 1972): 17.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

Aschenbrenner says, it is “a faith experience as we grow in our realization of our dear God’s awesome desire that we love with every ounce of our being.”⁶

Aschenbrenner sees the last movement of the *Examen* as growing “organically” out of this sorrow and contrition. The examinee is asked to make an honest assessment of his feelings for traces of fear and discouragement as he faces the future. If he senses them, he must ask why. What he should be feeling, according to Aschenbrenner, is optimism marked by “a great desire to face the future with renewed vision and sensitivity.”⁷ This abiding hope should be most manifest in the issue(s) surfaced in the *PE*, because hope is not grounded in one’s abilities but God’s “victory in Jesus Christ” even though this experience is “at times frightening and emptying but ultimately joyfully exhilarating.”⁸

Aschenbrenner does not dwell on sin and categories of sin in his *Consciousness Examen*. Instead, he has the examinee focus on how aspects of his sinful nature can be tempting him away from an authentic expression of his true Christ-like identity before the Father.⁹ The process of conversion is conceived as opening oneself to God’s invitation, the Father’s drawing oneself to examine aspects of his life hindering growth in his authentic identity. And it is the *quality* (of responsiveness) of the activity, more than the activity itself, that makes the difference for the Kingdom of God.¹⁰ In Aschenbrenner’s model, the experience of sinfulness must be enfolded in a faith experience of God’s love to effect conversion:

In this third dimension of the formal examen the growing faith sense of our sinfulness is very central. This is more of a spiritual faith reality as revealed by the Father (he changes “Father” to “God” in the reprint) in our experience than a heavily moralistic and guilt-laden reality. A deep sense of sinfulness depends on

⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Aschenbrenner's original article from *Review for Religious* frames “identity” in light of religious vocation. In a 2000 reprint of the article issued by the Jesuit Center for Spiritual Growth at Wernersville, PA, he expands his original concept of identity to include every Christian. Thus, the search for an authentic “religious identity” (Jesuit, Franciscan, Dominican etc.) from the original article, gives way to a search for daily renewal and growth in one’s “spiritual identity” in Christ (p. 3). *Ibid.*, 15.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

our growth in faith and is a dynamic realization which always ends in thanksgiving—the song of a “saved sinner.”¹¹

For Aschenbrenner, conversion is real when there exists a sense of sorrow in the examinee, which will spring “from the lack of honesty, and courage in responding to God’s call in the *PE*.”¹²

Aschenbrenner’s original article contains no language suggesting he considers the *Examen* as part of the three-fold mystical path or revelatory of a unique Ignatian mysticism. However, intimations of the three-fold path, especially the purgation that precedes illumination, are present in an article he wrote sixteen years later entitled: “Consciousness Examen: Becoming God’s Heart for the World.” Here Aschenbrenner takes a much more sober view of the conversion process, as well as conversion’s price, that is very unlike the gentleness he displays in the original article. The language he uses is more akin to that of the dark night of the senses.¹³

One of the legacies of Aschenbrenner’s article is the introduction of affective awareness and discernment as vital elements of the *Examen* method. Some have credited him with incorporating modern concepts of depth psychology into the reflection process; this is wholly appropriate since Ignatius’ own harrowing at Manresa due to his scruples appears to be both a spiritual and psychological *depth-event*. What Aschenbrenner desires the examinee to apprehend is consciousness of two different “spontaneities” that surface in the heart, one *of* and *for* God, and one evil and *against* God. When a person allows this

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹² *Ibid.*, 20.

¹³ “An honest repentant acknowledgment 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 embarrassment that come in the wake of such an acknowledgment sting and singe 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 acknowledging 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 that 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.” George Aschenbrenner, SJ, “Consciousness Examen: Becoming God’s Heart for the World,” *Review for Religious* 47, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 1988): 804-805.

quality of discernment to enter the *Examen* process, it moves from a narrow moralistic focus on “conscience” and becomes “examen of consciousness.”¹⁴

Indeed, Aschenbrenner believes that the widespread disregard for the practice of the *Examen*, in the lives of both religious and laity, is because its meaning has not been adequately understood. It is not, as he insists, a narrow, moralistic or voluntaristic self-improvement regimen. It is a discernment process intended to uncover God-spontaneities in the heart that compel the examinee to surrender false identities for the Christ-like self God is inviting him to become. He says such docility to the Spirit is akin to the obedience of faith Paul refers to in Romans 16:26.

Although not explicit in this article, there are intimations that Aschenbrenner is responding to the *spontaneity* of the 1970s and 80s “Me Generation,” mantra “just be yourself.” His 1972 reflections imply that the youth of the day resisted anything that denied spontaneity, unreflective as it may have been. The un-spontaneous was “un-Spiritual.” However, Aschenbrenner sees both the rigid formalism of an earlier era and the unreflective spontaneities of the day as problematic. The latter could reduce spirituality to a “selfish ordering of ourselves to our own ways.”¹⁵

It appears that Aschenbrenner’s experience between 1972 and 1980 led him to conclude that cultural trends necessitated a further focusing of the *Consciousness Examen* to combat the increasing “selfish ordering” he discusses. In 1980, he wrote that the *Examen’s* purpose is to lead one to the apostolic availability Ignatius intended: “The sensitivity of apostolic availability distinguishes the heart of a person of the ‘Third Class’ from one of the ‘Second Class.’”¹⁶ Here, Aschenbrenner comes close to framing the *Examen* in the same way Melloni articulates the unitive quality of Ignatian mysticism: as a state of constant election where one allows oneself to choose and to be chosen by Christ as part of an apostolic body for service to the Kingdom.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁶ George Aschenbrenner, SJ, “A Check on Our Availability: The Examen,” *Review For Religious* 39, no. 3 (May 1980): 323.

Aschenbrenner would agree with Melloni, who says that ultimately discernment is all about “allowing oneself to be taken by God, allowing Him to act through oneself in every event of history.”¹⁷ The *Examen* for Aschenbrenner then is not just the formal twice-daily prayer, but informal attentiveness that should permeate one’s entire day. This listening for the Spirit’s promptings is not an atomistic exercise but linked to the corporate mission of the Church and the religious body to which one belongs. It denotes a reverent and docile obedience that requires a death to self.

Hence for Aschenbrenner, any pressure, activity, or resistance to listening for the voice of God or in one’s willingness to take the necessary time for this active listening, will limit the *Examen*’s fruitfulness. Confusing the *Examen* with a narrow moralism, self-centeredness and lack of docility, or resistance to the purifying and “scouring” activity of the Spirit are, for Aschenbrenner, three culprits that strip the *Examen* of its power.

As mentioned previously, Aschenbrenner does not see the *Examen* gaining in popularity in the sixteen years from his first commentary till his reflections of 1988. His conviction holds. In the foreword to a 2006 book on the *Examen*, he writes: “Entry into the practice of examen that is regular and perduring is not easy for many people. They start to practice it because it seems important, but it just does not last.”¹⁸

David Townsend: The Examen and The Exercises: A Re-Appraisal

Townsend’s reflections are intended to recover a proper understanding of the place of the *Examen* in the *Spiritual Exercises*. However, the context of Ignatius’ *Examen* in the *Exercises*, as expressed by Townsend, is equally applicable to the *Examen*’s daily practice.

On the interplay between the *Particular* and *General* modalities, he follows the text of the *Exercises*, prompting him to conclude that since the *PE* is to be made after dinner and supper, this seems to be an opportune time to do the *GE* as well. “Ignatius suggests that the leisured times following meals can be profitably used to look back over the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 52.

¹⁸ Gallagher, 10.

previous segment of the day, and to look forward to the part of the day still to come.”¹⁹ Beyond these few cursory comments, he does not elaborate the mechanics of how the *GE* and the *PE* interact with each other. However, the author, when contacted, indicated the interplay was suggested by this text: “The use of the examens begins to throw up patterns of God's initiatives and the person's responses. Various aspects of those experiences and responses (both good and evil, helpful and unhelpful) may loom larger or seem to be of more central and crucial importance.”²⁰

Townsend states that awareness of sin and defect juxtaposed with an awareness of God's merciful love are a manifest component of the *Examens* in the *Exercises* of the *First Week*. In the context of the *First Week*, the particular faults one discovers in serious reflection on *The First Principle and Foundation* “give grist to the mill” and “allow the *GE* something to bite on.”²¹ He notes that the *Exercises* of the *First Week* open a retreatant to his “lively” involvement with evil. One is to pray for a *revelation* and a *grace* that, in language echoing Ignatius', shocks the senses: “a deep heartfelt knowledge of and abhorrence for the sheer disordered malice of sin and evil, in the face of his knowledge of the utter loving kindness of his God, and in order that his service of God be free from the influence of evil.”²²

For Townsend, sin is both pervasive and particular in the life of the Christian. The experience of conversion is rooted in receiving the grace of knowing both realities, i.e., the particular and pervasive identity of sin, and in light of that knowledge, receiving “the heartfelt grace of knowing that he is one of Christ's redeemed.”²³ It is a metamorphosis from loved sinner, to sinner forgiven, who loves God in return with a total gift of self. Townsend does not frame the *Examen* in the context of the mystical journey, or see in it a unique Ignatian mysticism. Nonetheless, his description of conversion would represent

¹⁹ David Townsend, SJ, "The Examen and the Exercises: A Re-Appraisal," *The Way Supplement* 52 (Spring 1985): 54.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 56.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 55.

the purgative stage of the traditional tripartite mystical path (purgation, illumination, and union).²⁴

Townsend affirms that the purpose of the *Examen*, in the context of the meditations and contemplations of the *Exercises*, is to help the exercitant become increasingly aware and affectively present “in a heart-felt manner” to experiences issuing from the day’s prayers. As the *Rules* are explained to the exercitant, the retreat director is to heed Ignatius’ dictum *SpEx* [15]: to “permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord” so he can *personally appropriate* the lessons being taught through the interplay of consolation and desolation. According to Ignatius, only the one who could “learn from his own experience” was to be initiated into the full *Exercises*.²⁵

The *Examen* follows experience to deepen it. There can be no real examination in abstract logic, says Townsend. So in light of the *experience* of two trajectories, the *Examen* offers two types of information. First, it highlights patterns of God’s initiative and the person’s responses. The individual must discern the *good and evil, helpful and unhelpful* responses to God’s invitations. And as the individual’s sensitivity to shifting moods, graces, and experiences increases, there will be greater need for the *Examens*.²⁶ Spiritual freedom and growth in indifference is the fruit of increasing clarity.

Second, the more one seeks to grow spiritually, the “enemy of human nature” will attack where one’s defenses to eternal salvation are weakest *SpEx* [327]. The *Examen*’s role here is to help one discern where the individual is weakest so he actively seeks from God the grace necessary to combat the attacks. Townsend states that the *Particular* modality is what one employs to keep guard over one’s weaknesses and to know the

²⁴ Townsend noted in an e-mail that he believes the *PE* need not be limited to the purgative state but can bleed into the illuminative and unitive as well: "The particular areas of life that may be unacknowledged, even deliberately avoided, by a person need not have any immediate or direct connection with sin. The particular may well be in itself positive. For instance: to take seriously recurring positive thoughts and spurs to action, rather than to be put off by the risk involved, efforts to be made—in other words, to heed the “encouraging spirit” rather than a “discouraging spirit.” This is more to do with 'illumination' & 'union,' even though there may be elements of 'purgation' too." As cited in: David Townsend, A Request, e-mail message to William Watson, April 23, 2008.

²⁵ Townsend, 56.

²⁶ *Ibid.* The almost constant examinations conducted by Ignatius thus mark a person deeply sensitive to the spiritual currents in his life.

graces one needs to grow spiritually. Importantly too, the *PE* will “foster cooperation” with the graces given to continue an individual’s trajectory toward the Divine.²⁷

Townsend declares that increasing sensitivity to the movements of consolation and desolation in all their *atomic* specificity only bear fruit when they are consciously *linked* together. Only in the consciously connected patterns will one discern the hand of God at work *and* the strategies of the enemy of human nature to destroy the Divine handiwork. Thus, an exercitant in the course of the *Spiritual Exercises*, or a Christian in his daily life outside a retreat context, must begin to see patterns in her life, and understand how both the Divinity and the enemy of human nature are working deliberately and strategically to secure her affections and allegiance.

Two items surface in Townsend’s article that can be construed as problems for a fruitful application of the *Examen*. First, one cannot remove sin and defect, and the integrated experience of God’s mercy towards sinners, from the *Examen*’s framework. Both are necessary for a proper discernment to reveal God’s initiatives and a person’s responses. Like Aschenbrenner, he is concerned if the focus on sin devolves into a “hard-headed moralistic approach,” it might only succeed in helping the examinee get “in touch with hopelessness and guilt, but not necessarily with sin.”²⁸

Nonetheless, an integrated focus on sin and grace, that retains a nuanced understanding of the interplay of consolations and desolations, can aid the understanding of life’s contemplative *flow* that produces contemplative *growth*. This is Townsend’s goal and the goal for the *Examen* that Aschenbrenner posits.²⁹ Just a year after Townsend’s article was published, Aschenbrenner wrote his new redaction of the *Consciousness Examen*, incorporating much starker language on sin’s role in the *Examen* prayer, quoting Townsend’s piece as a helpful resource.

Townsend addresses another difficulty that he pulls from Jules Toner; namely, that persons may choose not to live an examined life as befitting their station in life: “Here we have to note that this failure may not be general, but limited to one particular area of life

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 63.

where an individual is especially weak, where an otherwise generous and honestly reflective person draws the line and blinds himself or herself to what he or she does not want to see.”³⁰

There are two other issues challenging to the examinee Townsend details in an article he wrote for *Review for Religious* six years after *The Way Supplement* article appeared. In it, he discusses how modern culture’s secularism severely restricts “God-mindedness” by regulating the Divine to smaller and smaller corners of human consciousness.³¹ He argues that the *Examen*’s practitioners must intentionally foster a belief that God is present, moment-to-moment, and is “at work in all of life, both personal and communal.”³² Without this moment-to-moment God-mindedness, the *Examen* can degenerate “into that harsh kind of moralizing which does not need God and which suffers from the absence of the God of compassion. Or, the *Examen* can degenerate into a un-christian and self-centered form of self-improving.”³³ The theme of self-centeredness emerges strongly in the writings of Joseph Tetlow.

Townsend sees this lack of God-mindedness also blinding one to God’s *gift of both* creation and creature: “there is nothing that has not been given.” The fundamental attitude of gratitude the *Examen* requires is smothered by a “world that has little practical use for God, and where aggressive consumerism, productivity, success, and achievement color all.”³⁴ Those who use the *Examen* need to consciously cultivate gratitude for every dimension of human life and creation in order to combat, *and* to highlight, the pervasive ingratitude of contemporary society.

³⁰ Jules J. Toner, SJ, *A Commentary on Saint Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1982), 232.

³¹ David Townsend, SJ, "Finding God in a Busy Day," *Review for Religious* 50, no. 1 (January-February 1991): 45.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 48-50.

Joseph Tetlow: The Examen of Particulars

Joseph Tetlow's *Examen of Particulars* is written, not for elites, but for every Christian. Ignatius referred to *ejercicios leves* or "light exercises" for those not called to make a serious election about a state of life: *SpEx* [18]. Tetlow envisions a method of prayer accessible to "the people that Iñigo and his first companions, and a great number of the founders of other congregations, reached out to when they helped souls."³⁵ Further on he speaks about the need for an *Examen* "available to the merest beginners as well as someone who falls in love with God again on every starry night."³⁶ In short, Tetlow wants to provide an *Examen* of simple exercises that anyone can use.

Mentioning both the *Particular* and the *General* (five-point) modalities, his technique is conceived as a five-point *PE*. He does not specify when or how often his method should be practiced but we presume, as with the other commentators, that he expects the *Examen* to be practiced once or twice daily.

Tetlow does not shy away from focusing his *Examen* on sin, conceiving sin as a failure to listen to, and to act on, the authentic desires God is stirring in human hearts. Tetlow conceives sin not so much as contravening God's will, but rather as "letting God down" from what "Father, Son and Spirit graciously hope for in us and our lifeworld."³⁷ He believes framing sin as *failure* brings the examinee in contact with both the interior and exterior ramifications of resisting God's desires. This resistance results in both an interior fault and a "positive injury" to that person's "lifeworld;" lifeworld here conceived as the totality of one's social and relational interactions.³⁸

Defining sin this way, Tetlow constructively introduces *shame* into the sin lexicon. Shame, unlike *private* guilt, is usually both personal and social denoting "disgrace, ignominy, loss of esteem and reputation."³⁹ The repudiation of shame, Tetlow infers,

³⁵ Joseph Tetlow, SJ "The Examen of Particulars," *Review for Religious* 56, no. 3 (May-June 1997): 233.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 238.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 241.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

resulted from pervasive individualism and narcissism present both in the culture at large, and in the Church. Denunciations of narcissism and individualism, and a recovery of shame and personal responsibility for one's sinfulness, loom large also in Tetlow's earlier 1994 article for *Studies*:

But in stressing our experience of God's acceptance and making it the whole truth, we have made ourselves liable to forget two other pertinent truths. First, *to accept* does not mean *to approve* or *to condone*. God loves us infinitely but hates our sin as much. So when we are examining our lives and find sin, acceptance, both self-acceptance and God's, must mean that we recognize a failure or evildoing and move on to forthright shame or guilt and to repentance. Some writers have been so eager that we not lose sight of God's *acceptance* that they seem to misplace God's judgment. And second, when we remember that God accepts me as I am, we can all too easily stay with an image of the self as a point in our life world, the mere focus of an unrepeatable experience. As narcissistic individualists—we males have deepened in narcissism over the past years, therapists testify—we search tirelessly for evidences “at the core of our being, of our deepest and truest ‘self’, for our unrepeatable uniqueness.” Our self-examination too readily excludes the realities that we are utterly webbed into other lives, accountable to others around us in multiple ways, and responsible for others around us in complex ways.⁴⁰

Tetlow sees sin's characteristics, both complex and multivalent, stemming from the *original* sin in its inherited, familial and personal manifestations. Nonetheless, he is passionate in arguing for the close scrutiny and personal responsibility the *PE* facilitates, so individuals can distinguish between “my sin, sin, or sin in me.”⁴¹ He is unwilling to cede ground to the therapeutic industry to dumb down sin. Nor does he tolerate the blame game as it short-circuits the personal responsibility that conversion requires.

Instead, he argues that one can examine one's life, and grow to accept one's own collusion in the compulsions, addictions, negative self image, prejudice, abuse of all kinds, and neuroticisms one experiences. And he argues that his redaction of the *Examen* frees one to do that. He believes these compulsions etc. are the “dark night” with which most Christians daily struggle. An *Examen* for these persons needs to lead into the

⁴⁰ Tetlow does not make the connection explicit between sin and narcissism. Yet, his focus in this section on the loneliness and alienation of modern day religious might result from the fragmentation (read *individualism*) that sin, as narcissism and self-love, generates both in the *interior* person and the *exterior* social “life world” he articulates. Joseph Tetlow, SJ “The Most Postmodern Prayer: American Jesuit Identity and the Examen of Conscience, 1920-1990,” *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 26, no. 1 (January 1994): 49-50.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 241.

difficulties such sinful neuroticisms produce, if they are to achieve integrated growth. For Tetlow, conversion is far from a singular event—it is a long, difficult struggle; it implies ongoing conversion.

With this hermeneutic, it is not surprising that Tetlow describes conversion, ongoing conversion, as the willingness to accept, at ever-deeper levels, personal responsibility for co-operation with God's grace in the renewal and re-creation of one's self and one's lifeworld. The *Examen* for him is the expression *par excellence* of this ongoing conversion in personal self-responsibility for the sake of the Kingdom. In the Ignatian context, this type of conversion necessarily demands the utmost gift of self-surrender, self-responsibility. "The *magis* will continually involve further insight into my own thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and desiring and into how these are or are not realizing God's hopes in me. This is the point of the incarnation."⁴²

Tetlow mentions aspects of the mystical path in both the articles referenced thus far. The earlier article describes the *Examen* as part of the purgative path of devotional Catholicism. In both religious life and the faith life of lay Catholics, abhorrence of sin, examination of one's conscience for traces of sin, great and small, and confession of sin and amendment of life were part and parcel of the purgative path. In the framework of Tetlow's historical survey (1920-1990), the legalistic framework of the "accountant's examen" was not adequate in facilitating spiritual growth in holiness. He infers that not many found it effective in the continuing need to purge failings and sins.

Tetlow maintains that the Society rescued Jesuits from the failed purgative path of the so called "accountant's examen" by inviting them to consider self-examination within a wider social milieu.⁴³ In this invitation to expand the concept of the *Examen*, their liberation was mainly from individualism and narcissism. Both "isms", Tetlow maintains, were unconsciously promoted by the Jesuit ethos. A narrow focus on sin and self-perfection did not give way to social engagement, but the *Examen's* focus was enlarged

⁴² *Ibid.*, 246.

⁴³ "Certain features of our Ignatian heritage can be given a communitarian dimension; provided of course, the personal practice for which they were originally intended is not abandoned. For instance, the examination of conscience could, at times, be made a shared reflection on the community's fidelity to its apostolic mission." Society of Jesus, *Thirty First & Thirty Second General Congregations* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1977), 474. Cited hereafter as: "GC 31-32."

so that within it, a man had to attend to his relationships, and the ways he was or was not obeying Jesus' own command; *love one another as I have loved you*.

What Tetlow describes is a shift in consciousness in how sin was conceived and tackled, not singly, but communally as persons who know they are sinners and are called together, *as community*, to counter sin's social impact in their own lives and in the world. Tetlow notes the historical development of conceiving sin from exclusively interior and personal categories, to the concept of *sin among us*, and in this, hopes awareness is cultivated of how *personal* sin touches one's entire lifeworld.

The sober analysis of the secularism, individualism, and narcissism of contemporary culture in both articles eventually brings Tetlow back to the interior rootedness of sin as a personal struggle, a dark night, requiring an individual's effort and personal responsibility. One needs to cooperate with God's grace to pry loose sin's grip on the heart. He seeks to construct an *Examen* that opens a fruitful path to genuine purgation. Purgation's goal is individual liberation—freedom to serve the Kingdom—within the framework of one's lifeworld and the divine gifts God has given to him.

Regarding the role of discernment within a dual trajectory toward evil or the Divine, Tetlow's metaphor is the "story" of an individual's life, in the context of his "human gifts, qualities and achievements."⁴⁴ More specifically, it is discerning the story of a person's life as interwoven with his gifts, desires and wants, God's desiring in him; i.e., *God's* wants, *and* Spirit-inspired deeds of love enacted on behalf of Christ. Tetlow's understanding of discernment is an ability to distinguish in and through one's *desiring* and *wants*, those which are of God and those which are manifestations of the individualism and narcissism so destructive of the individual, his life in God, and his availability to respond lovingly to those in his lifeworld.

Tetlow sees an individual's honest assessment of sin's rootedness in the structure of one's personality, and acceptance of responsibility for the particular way sin erodes the ability to respond freely and generously to God's desiring in him, as the key to unlocking its method. He succinctly explains his five-point method as follows:

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 235.

The examen of particulars has five moments. First, recall an incident or an experience. Second, remember your response. Third, recall which of your gifts were or might have been involved in this concrete experience. Fourth, examine the particulars: What was really going on? And, fifth, ponder in Christ, what comes next?⁴⁵

The personal and cultural challenges preventing the *Examen's* fruitfulness have two principal expressions for Tetlow. The first is the “failed accountant’s examen” and its too exclusive reliance on a voluntarism and behaviorism that ultimately did not serve genuine spiritual growth. This is the narrow moralism both Aschenbrenner and Townsend decried. The second is the individualism and narcissism he sees as all too prevalent in culture, including the culture of the *Spiritual Exercises’* practitioners:

But, as far as my information goes, few directors of the *Exercises* today really urge the importance of the examen of conscience. Some do, indeed, promote some similar practices such as journaling, one of the favorite ways of self-examination (or better, of self-appreciation) in the New-Age.⁴⁶

His concern about these individualistic and narcissistic trends persists. Five years later, he states “every life today is plagued in some measure by individualism and alienation.”⁴⁷

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 231.

⁴⁷ Joseph Tetlow, SJ, “Examen: Persons in Relationship,” *Review for Religious* (March-April 2002): 119.

Part Two: English, Roccasalvo, Van Breeman, Hugh Campbell & Kneale

*John English, SJ*⁴⁸

Based on themes in his early writings on the *Examen*, it is clear John English was influenced by Aschenbrenner's *Review for Religious* article on the *Consciousness Examen*. English contextualizes the *Examen* as *conscious awareness*. He does not distinguish between modalities of the *PE* and the *GE*, but sees clearly the daily practice as having more to do with the *GE* mode. Of this he says "There was a tendency to spend most of the time looking at sins and faults – as if preparing for confession...it was an examination of conscience in terms of sins and faults."⁴⁹ English presents a *Consciousness Examen*, but it might best be called *Awareness Examen*. It has five points: (1.) Gratitude Awareness; (2.) Grace for Light Awareness; (3.) Investigation Awareness; (4.) Sorrow/Joy Awareness; (5.) Seeking the Ongoing Grace of Awareness.

While English does not reference the *PE* in his notes, he understands the daily practice of *conscious awareness* as leading to the self-discovery Ignatius' *PE* intends. The practice of this awareness *Examen* over "days and months and years" renders one conscious of his *predominant* fault and as well, a predominant grace. Thus, for English, the knowledge of what Rodríguez calls "King Vice" (and we might add, "King Grace") is revealed in an unfolding of particular struggles (and joys) the examinee faces, day in and day out.⁵⁰

Sin, in English's paradigm, is both Original and personal. Both forms of sin have to be acknowledged and resisted by the examinee. Original sin for English has an evolutionary dimension, accruing power since the first sin of Adam. It is also traceable in the very structure of one's family. Recognizing psychological theorists, English affirms that the first five years of existence fix much of a person's responses to life. Each

⁴⁸ Canadian Jesuit John English is part of the first wave of modern commentators on Ignatian spirituality. His book on Ignatian spiritual freedom appeared one year after Aschenbrenner's *Consciousness Examen* was published. In that same year, English presented a conference on discernment and the *Examen* at the Jesuit retreat house in Guelph, Ontario. This summary is, in large part, based on published notes from that conference.

⁴⁹ John English, SJ, *Discernment and the Examen* (Guelph, Ontario: by Ignatius Jesuit Centre of Guelph, 1979), 14. Cited hereafter as "English."

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

individual has the responsibility to sort through the *movements across one's being* and determine what is biological, psychological, and spiritual. Thus, English urges each individual to seek knowledge of her history, for in the spiritual realm of this history, she can discover where sin and love have made their home. In this regard, each individual is accountable for the presence of both sin and love as driving forces of the personality.⁵¹

English sees the unchanging aspects of our psychological history as elements that “God has permitted.” These aspects are part and parcel of Original Sin as it has come down to us from one man through the centuries and through our families: “We are not as total and whole as we should be” and “some of this stuff I am not going to change.”⁵² Growth requires that we become aware of our sin and *its roots*. Getting to sin's roots can take an individual into the realm of memory, especially events that are unconscious.⁵³

English maintains that this exploration leading to deeper awareness should be “relaxed” and not entered into with a fearful spirit. Why? Because God's greatest attribute is his mercy. Original Sin and personal sin render one impotent, and make a person incapable of loving. Personal sin is a turning away from God, really a refusal *of* love more than a refusal *to* love. In light of this paradigm, conversion for English is discerned in an *awareness* of joy. When one refuses love, he has an awareness of sorrow. But in accepting love, he has awareness of joy.⁵⁴ English maintains that even Jesus embodies the limitations of the human race up to his time: “He has the sins of Abraham, and the sins of David, and the sins of Ruth and the sins of the prostitute. He has all this in him. It is all given.”⁵⁵

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 24.

⁵³ “Praying with graced history relies heavily on our faith memory (*anamnesis*)-a mystery in itself. Our memory retains all the events and responses to our life. These include those events that are immediately present to us and those that were unconscious or forgotten. Events are relegated to the unconscious for a number of reasons. Some are repressed. Releasing the secrets of repressed events usually requires psychological counseling. Often it is helpful for health reasons if as many life experiences as possible are externally expressed. ‘[E]verything exposed by the light becomes visible’ (Eph 5:13).” John J. English, SJ, *Spiritual Freedom* (Chicago, Loyola University Press, 1995), 263.

⁵⁴ English, 43.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

English does not delineate a mystical framework for his *Examen*. However, he uses the highly mystical first letter of John to frame a method of discernment viz., the trajectories toward the demonic and the Divine.⁵⁶ For English, the “spirit of the world” is the spirit of success and vanity. He suggests that the marketing culture in the West appeals to “all the capital disorders in our being.”⁵⁷ The spirit of the world is the spirit of *Antichrist*. For English, *Antichrist* is the spirit of self-indulgence that Paul warned against (Gal 5:16-26).⁵⁸

The *awareness* one seeks in discernment is, first, an awareness of the force of evil as a negative tendency in one’s being whose end is suicide.⁵⁹ A person is to crucify self-indulgent passions because they prevent one from hearing the voice of God. On the other side, one seeks an awareness of the voice of God urging one to move beyond self, to others. Such movements of good and evil, inspired by God and the demonic, are movements “across one’s being.” The search for the roots of these movements can take one deeply into his personal history.

Two elements surface in English’s writing that can inhibit both the practice of the *Examen* or if practiced, render it sterile. The first is the force of *Antichrist* in the dominant culture that embodies a drive-to-success. English maintains that no one is immune from this temptation: “The desire for recognition or for success can be just as powerful a force for a person, inside a cloistered convent or monastery, as it can in the business world.”⁶⁰

⁵⁶ “Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. And this is the spirit of the antichrist of which you have heard that is coming; **and now it is already in the world**. Little children, you are from God, and have conquered them; for the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. They are from the world; therefore what they say is from the world, and the world listens to them. God listens to us, and whoever is not from God does not listen to us. From this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error.” 1 Jn 4: 1-6.

⁵⁷ English, 2.

⁵⁸ Paul uses categories similar to the descriptions of desolation employed by Ignatius.

⁵⁹ English, 7. Ignatius’ struggles with suicidal impulses at Manresa come to mind.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

The second challenge can be framed as fear of the suffering and pain the purgative process requires if one is to grow spiritually, emotionally and psychologically. The work of Christ to bring one spiritual freedom demands a surrender of pride. This work “begins with an awareness of weakness, an awareness of limitations, an awareness of poverty. It is that kind of poorness which then leads to humiliations.”⁶¹

Those who want to be with the Lord must be willing “to suffer and be humiliated.”⁶² The trials associated with this journey to freedom in *being with* the Lord, in essence, are the circumstances associated with the mystical path from purgation to union. They can also be viewed as the struggles against individualism and narcissism that Tetlow elucidates, and that Ignatius confronted head-on with his scrupulosity at Manresa.

Joan L. Roccasalvo, CSJ

Joan Roccasalvo’s reflections on the *Examen* are simple and short. Her main contribution is gently nudging the examinee to consider anew the Ignatian mystical horizon. For Roccasalvo, one should examine her daily experiences to discover, daily, *God present in all things*. She argues for a space of solitude in a Christian’s day to be apart, and to ponder “my life with God, my life with myself, and with all created reality.”⁶³ In this, she sees the *Examen* facilitating a true mystical awareness.

She expands the mystical focus of the *Examen* further in her 2005 *Examen* reflections where she invites the examinee to ponder whether she has been conscious of the sacrament of the present moment in the course of her day. This type of God-mindedness, mentioned previously by Townsend, comes to her via the writings of the French Jesuit, Jean-Pierre de Cassaude, in his book, *Abandonment to Divine Providence*, or as it is sometimes titled, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*.

Perhaps inspired by de Cassaude and her Ignatian-influenced desire for finding God everywhere, she expands the examinee’s reflections to include not only God, self, others and creation, but specifically a focus on ecology: “Do I have a God-centered, sacramental

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 54.

⁶³ Joan L. Roccasalvo, CSJ, “The Daily Examen,” *Review for Religious* (March-April 1986): 281.

reverence for the earth? Do I see the cosmos as ‘a body of God’? As a steward and co-creator of the planet, do I express gratitude for the beauty of God’s creation and work responsibly with others to preserve it?”⁶⁴ In this we might view her expansion of sin into the ecological realm as a reflection of Tetlow’s description of the *Examen*’s evolution from a *private* exercise, to one that has genuine relational and social significance.

Peter G. van Breemen, SJ

Peter van Breemen’s examen reflections bypass the *structure* of the *PE* and *GE* and instead focus on the Examens’ theological content, which for him is in the virtue of thankfulness and gratitude. He contextualizes the *Examens*’ purpose using language akin to Aschenbrenner’s consciousness paradigm. However, Van Breemen concept comes not from Aschenbrenner, but from the German psychologist, Albert Görres, who, fifteen years before Aschenbrenner, wrote on the theme of consciousness and the *Examen*. Quoting Görres he writes:

1. *Examen conscientiae* means: to examine the consciousness. Hence ‘*emotiones animae*,’ the movements of mind and heart with which a person meets reality, get special significance. Reflecting on one’s own psychical experiences is, however, not a circling around the ego. On the contrary, it is distinctly theocentric, directed towards God: as he acts and reveals himself in these movements of mind and heart and as he wants to be found in these inner things and in all other things as well. 2. In the Spiritual Exercises (and from there in miniature in the examen) thankfulness, in the sense of comprehending and doing justice to reality, is applied to and practiced in the different areas of reality.⁶⁵

The goal of this type of consciousness is to *feel* one’s life honestly and *observe* it without prejudice. Once again referencing Görres, van Breemen asserts that a lack of clear-sightedness reaches “astonishing heights” in both theologians and religious.⁶⁶ In particular, one is to become conscious that since “ingratitude is the cause, beginning, and

⁶⁴ Joan L. Roccasalvo, CSJ, *Prayer for Finding God in All Things* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 2005), 21.

⁶⁵ Peter G. van Breemen, SJ, “The Examination of Conscience,” *Review for Religious* (July-August 1990): 601.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 602.

the origin of all sins,” one must be thankfully dependent, gratefully trusting, and contented in not being the center of the universe.

Tetlow’s concerns about narcissism and individualism are echoed here as van Breemen declares: “self-centeredness and egoism are the archenemies of every kind of thankfulness.” A spirit of thankfulness, by its very nature, cannot be conceited or self-sufficient because it (thankfulness) knows the Source of all.⁶⁷

Mary Hugh Campbell

A very concise and adroit analysis of the *PE*, in the context of the Ignatian Paradigm and the three other conversion paradigms discussed above, comes from the pen of Sister Mary Hugh Campbell. In 1971, writing one year before Aschenbrenner, Campbell highlights the *PE* as the cornerstone of Ignatian availability and apostolic zeal in service of the Kingdom.⁶⁸ For Hugh Campbell, the *PE* is captured in the “check list,” and the *GE* in the “five points.” She does not specify their exact interplay except to say that they are practiced three times daily; two *Examens* and a *previsioning* when rising that sets the agenda for the day.

Ignatius, she suggests, framed the *Examens* both in the context of the *Exercises* and beyond them, as the most efficient and fruitful means for one to accomplish the will of God—to have apostolic zeal in the aid of souls. Citing John Futrell, Hugh Campbell says that Ignatius seems to have relied mainly on the *Examens* continuously practiced, to achieve this apostolic availability. She draws from both Ignatius and Louis Lallemand in her analysis of the effectiveness of this continuous exercise of the *PE*. Yet, the most concise description of this continuous practice in her essay comes from the Jesuit, Claude de la Colombière, who “vowed never to pass from one occasion to another without a backward-forward look: from self-scrutiny to discernment.”⁶⁹

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 604-608.

⁶⁸ Sister Mary Hugh Campbell, “The Particular Examen—Touchstone of a Genuinely Apostolic Spirituality,” *Review for Religious* (September 1971): 775.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 780.

Campbell frames the *Examens* as the means to this availability for service, since they bring to light sin's "false ideas and erroneous judgments" and assigns "each of these its local habitation and name."⁷⁰ Sin divides the heart and renders what is real, vague. The role of the *PE* is to help one bend to the "real": "Seen in this light the examen becomes a discipline in authenticity, a sharpening of the pole of purity of heart which ensures genuineness of docility to the Spirit."⁷¹

The particular focus on one fault at a time in the process of purification, says Campbell, exposes Ignatius' personality in its "labored realism of one for whom military planning had been a fact of daily experience."⁷² She has a response, too, for those who would disregard such a practice as too laborious or ineffectual:

"And if his (Ignatius) proposed concentration upon one fault at a time has impressed many as mechanistic and rigid, it has been suggested that their preference for prolonging sterile efforts endlessly is hardly less painful. And Ravignan notes, in this connection, *How strong one is, when he concentrates all his energy in unity. To think of only one thing, wish only one thing, do, finally, only one thing is the secret of all power.*"⁷³

Campbell makes no explicit references to the *PE's* role in the mystical life. Nevertheless, she suggests that this constant backwards glance to sift out the vagueness of false ideas, and erroneous judgments, from genuine ones, will eventually lead to an increased openness and freedom, as well as to the unitive graces offered one in the Ignatian *Contemplation to Attain the Love of God*.

It is the focus on Ignatian discernment, however, where Hugh Campbell concentrates most of her analysis. Writing at a time when the practice of discernment was gaining momentum, she clarifies that for Ignatius, discernment had a very precise meaning: "It is the name for the entire dynamic process of discovering and responding to the actual word of God here and now. It is the core of Ignatian spirituality. Within it—and one might add, only within it—the practice of the daily examen of conscience is completely

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 777.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 779.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

intelligible.”⁷⁴ It is this constant discernment and sifting to hear God in the here and now, aligning one’s heart and will with God, where one finally ends in that mystical state of union—finding God everywhere—and offering oneself in a willing service of love.

Her awareness of the two trajectories of the heart in this process of discernment is clarified by her reading of Lallemand, as “the last reach of the highest perfection in this world is zeal for souls”:⁷⁵

He defined purity of the heart to mean “having nothing therein which is in however small a degree opposed to God and the operation of His grace.” And he went so far as to say that this was the exercise of the spiritual life against which the spirit of evil directed most opposition. He urged those under his charge to guard themselves carefully from any deliberate resistance to the Spirit by venial sin, to learn to recognize the first disorderly movements of their hearts, to watch over and regulate their thoughts, so as to recognize the inspirations of God—so as to be able, in other words, to clearly discern the word of God in the concrete situations which presented themselves...He expected in the end, spontaneity without strain, sureness of discernment, readiness, in the service of souls, for the cross.⁷⁶

Campbell identifies two principal subjects as roadblocks to the *Examen*’s practice. The first is a critique of its perceived rigidity. The *Examen* as a ritualistic prayer, exemplifies for many the worst type of formalism. But she is confused as to how the *Examen*’s perceived lack genuineness took root. For her, Ignatius’ spirituality is marked by “dynamism, initiative and élan.” In an age that has awakened to the idea that the fundamental movement of a person is outside of the self, the *Examen*, for her, is the tool that ensures this trajectory. “Far from having become ‘irrelevant’ in spiritualities vowed to the genuine only, it is rather the infallible touchstone of their authenticity.”⁷⁷

The second big challenge she perceives—echoing Tetlow, Aschenbrenner, English and others—is that the *Examen* attacks the egoism of self. Referencing Lallemand, she asserts that “the heart recoils from nothing so much as this search and scrutiny...all the

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 776.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 775.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 778.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 781.

powers of the soul are disordered beyond measure, and we do not wish to know it, because the knowledge is humiliating to us.”⁷⁸

Brendan Kneale, FSC

Brendan Kneale’s primary focus in his *Examen* analysis is the “patterns” of sin, both as acts of commission and omission, in one’s thoughts, words and deeds. In this, he is looking beyond the classic *PE* and *GE* modalities. Also, while valuing the work of therapeutic techniques, his analysis spotlights *conscience*, not the sub-conscious or consciousness *per se*. He is concerned with the morality of both actions and omissions as products of a person who has the freedom to monitor and promote good behavior, as well as the responsibility to correct erroneous conduct.

Still, Kneale is interested that one’s examination target the roots of sin, especially if failure in the commandments and capital sins of pride, covetousness, lust, anger, gluttony, envy and sloth is frequent and sustained. Looking to the root causes of repetitive sin is the heart of his method’s monitoring of *attitudes*: “Are we saddled with attitudes that damage our relations with God, our neighbor, and our own self?”⁷⁹

Entrenched attitudes, whether they are the result of cultivated habits and vices, or whether they stick to the personality by its immersion in the sins and biases of the dominant culture, should be examined. He realizes that this level of reflection is challenging, but “such an examination is one way to get closer to a state of ‘justice beyond that of the scribes and Pharisees,’ that is to grow in the justification talked about by St. Paul.”⁸⁰

Kneale’s two discerned trajectories are attitudes that reveal whether one has the mind and heart of Christ. Normative attitudes in our lives, contrary to the mind of Christ, need close scrutiny. In this regard, the model one should aspire to emulate is the Virgin who put on the mind of Christ. She was “conceived without darkness of intellect, weakness of

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 777.

⁷⁹ Brendan Kneale, FSC, "Examining My Conscience: Do I Have an Attitude," *Review for Religious* (September-October 2001): 476.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 477.

will, or disorder among her passions.”⁸¹ The process of conversion in healing false attitudes are classic remedies: fasting, prayers and sacraments: “The sacraments help us to pursue perfection like hers. And a penetrating examination of conscience helps us to profit more from those sacraments.”⁸²

A solitary difficulty inhibiting the *Examen’s* effectiveness surfaces in Kneale’s analysis: recidivism relating to sinful patterns. Recidivism can lead to a healthy questioning of one’s practice of the *Examen* so one penetrates deeper into the heart that Isaiah indicates is “more devious than any other thing.”⁸³ Or, recidivism can lead one to conclude that she is a *victim* of forces beyond her control, like early life traumas that “induce us to behave neurotically and compulsively.”⁸⁴ In the first instance, one can be led to genuine conversion. But in the latter instance, an individual is prone to believe change is not possible and hence excuses herself, consciously or unconsciously, from the responsibility of expending effort in seeking personal conversion.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 475.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*