

# Scotland's Third Order Franciscan Spiritual Journal



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Dear Friends of St Francis in the Third Order,

In Western culture and education, analysis is regarded as important, so important that other approaches to reviewing and thinking are seen as less effective and, indeed, less serious. Our University system of education sees analytical thinking as a fundamental tool. Indeed, in some universities candidates for places will not be offered them if they are lacking such thinking despite the quality and quantity of the 'A' level (or equivalent) examinations.

The word 'examination' which I have just used has been a key word in the history of Christian spirituality. For example, in the Night Office (Compline), there is a section at the beginning which is called 'The Examination of Conscience'. Indeed, in various traditions of spiritual exercise, the same term is used. The problem is that there is attached to examination that automatic assumption that analysis is part of the process.

When I come to the end of a day and address the issue of examining what has gone on in the day for me and how I have thought and felt about it all, analysis becomes so easily a debate inside my head that can on occasion spiral down into useless guilt and even depression. So the question is how to examine the day without analysis!

In recent years, there has been a recovery in what is known as 'The Examen'. The term comes mostly from the Ignatian tradition of spirituality, where the full description is 'The Examen of Consciousness' (Note ... not 'Conscience'). What the word 'examen' suggests is not analysis but a deepening awareness (consciousness) of what is going on in my life...a noticing.... It's not quite observation, which can imply an aloof objectivity. In fact, the 'examen' is profoundly practical and simple. However, the exercise is not primarily about memory or about psychol-

ogy, although these elements are important. The focus is on God.

Francis of Assisi built up a profound and, indeed, a constant awareness of the presence of God in the detail of his life, based on his faith in the universality of the Grace of God. So 'confession' ('confiteor') was a process not just of penitence, but of realising that that presence of God was deeply involved in the darkness and the destructiveness of his life, as well as the light and the creativity. In Ignatian spirituality, that basis for the 'examen' is on a deepening and exercised awareness of the 'movement' of God in all aspects of my life. That, therefore, goes well beyond a psychology of awareness and into the realm of revelation. As Ignatius himself put it, the spiritual life, including the 'examen' is about 'Finding God in all things'. Of course, confession (including sacramental confession) has always been of vital significance to Franciscans. To this, I shall return in another Newsletter.



At this point, I would point out an excellent little booklet written by Brother Thomas Anthony SSF called: 'Penitence, Confession, Reconciliation' and is published by St Clare Leaflets [No 27]. You can obtain a copy from The Community of St Clare, Freeland, Oxford OX7 2AJ. I mention this booklet in this context because there is helpful material in the booklet towards increasing awareness through prayer.

The habit of the 'examen' is based firstly on a profound thankfulness for the movement of God in all aspects of my life; 'Deus meus et omnia', the phrase that Francis prayed with, particularly at

night: 'My God and my all'. That devastating simplicity can only occur in a life that is dedicated to prayer and the practice of the 'examen' in whatever form it comes. So before I go any further, I would emphasise that the examen demands practice and discipline. Also, it can form the basis of real preparation for sessions with a spiritual director or soul friend.

The 'examen' is not about slavishly following someone else's template, but gradually adapting it to personal needs and experiences, while keeping to a basic set of principles.



1. Before entering a time of spiritual awareness, it is essential to adopt stillness and prayerfulness. You may want to practice the 'examen' in the context of an office or other short prayer. However you enter this period, remember that God is with you now.
2. Then allow this simple question to 'be' with you. What has occurred in my day that has brought a sense of creativity, well-being, delight, hope etc...? Do not analyse your response, because the analysis will deaden your recollection. Live with your experience of remembering. Be there again and simply notice. Do not reject what may appear to be trivial. That judgement is simply another form of analysis! Just notice and pass on to another experience. If you have no such experience, then so be it. Do not analyse why! Then thank God for the experience of recollection.
3. What or who has given you sorrow today? Notice that I haven't suggested any qualitative word such a 'bad' or 'wrong'.... In this period of your examen, you can easily get caught in analysis of 'what I did wrong'...'what she did to make me feel etc...' 'If only I had...' 'If he hadn't...etc'. Just notice and enter the experience again and notice peacefully. Christ is with you to love you in it all. Be thankful. Remember that being thankful is not necessarily about 'feeling' thankful. Apart from anything else, by being thankful you may be unlocking an unconscious door of resolution and reconciliation.
4. Then look at the issues in your life that are making themselves felt and that are calling

to be addressed. Here again, don't be tempted to do some work and do the jobs that may not have been finished. This exercise is not about updating your 'to do' list. There maybe issues which are nothing to do with 'doing'... they maybe about attitudes or feelings or thoughts. There maybe a major issue in your life for which you have to prepare and may be causing anxiety. Some, of course, might be exciting...to which you are greatly looking forward. Just notice. It may be that you realise they don't really need to be addressed! You can let them go, perhaps! Avoid judgement and guilt! Again be thankful...

5. Now it is essential to let go of all this! Perhaps taking a few notes might be helpful, but don't turn that into a laborious exercise, which can stimulate self-judgement, judgement of others and analysis. Keep the tone thankful and simple. Remember the 'examen' is about the movement of God in you.

One final caution, although feelings and thoughts are important, it is important not to get caught in the judgement that something may be 'wrong' with you because you don't 'feel' this or 'thank' that.

The whole process, I must emphasise, is one that is best shared with a soul friend or spiritual director, who can help you with noticing spiritual 'movement' or development. This approach can also help you to learn to avoid analysis and, importantly, to be accepting and loving of yourself. Laughter is a frequent experience in the examen. Although make sure you are by yourself or someone may think you have taken complete of your senses. Actually most Franciscans have!

What I have written here, as I have indicated, is only one of many approaches to the 'examen'. The 'examen' is there to increase confidence and joy in God... Be Franciscan! If you have any comments or questions please let me know on my email address: [alexandermartin.shaw@virgin.net](mailto:alexandermartin.shaw@virgin.net)

+Martin  
Bishop of Argyll and The Isles  
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