

painfully conscious of his sins. Love's smiling question, "Who made the eyes but I?" is clearly rhetorical, reminding the speaker that he knows the answer.

When the speaker exclaims, "Let my shame/Go where it doth deserve," Love asks another rhetorical question, "Know you not who bore the blame?" Forgiveness is already granted to the penitent guest. The speaker is overwhelmed by Love's mercy. The request to be a servant recalls the cry of the prodigal son of Luke 15: "I have sinned against heaven, and before thee, and am no more worthy to be called thy son; make me as one of thy hired servants." There may also be an echo of Peter's dismay at the Last Supper that his Lord would stoop to such lowly service as foot-washing. But Love is both host and servant to all who come to the feast.

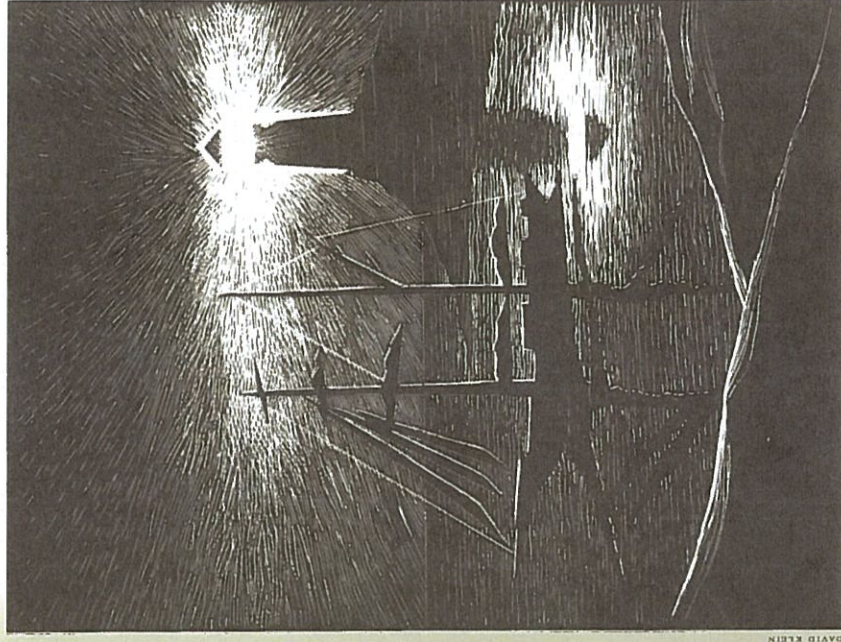
The final image of sitting at Love's table of course suggests the Eucharistic feast, where Love the Sacrifice is also the eternal Host. Indeed, Love's last two speeches of forgiveness and invitation are conveyed in the present tense. Until then the speaker seems to be recalling a significant past experience, but the shift of tense suggests that the event not only happened, but is always happening and will always happen, for every weary traveler that enters the door of this hall.

The Eucharistic imagery suggests that the poem may be read, not only as the description of an inward spiritual encounter that might occur anywhere, but specifically as an imitation of the pattern of a church service. When one enters the house of God, after a long week of dusty struggling on the journey of life, one listens to the readings, is reminded of truths which may be half-forgotten amid the pressure of other matters, and joins in a confession of sin. What one has done and left undone often weighs heavily on the spirit. In the Anglican service familiar to George Herbert, an absolution is spoken to remind the penitents of the forgiving grace surrounding and welcoming them. Shortly afterwards the bread and wine are served, drawing each guest more closely into the family of Love.

No doubt even in the seventeenth century the elements of the church service could easily become thoughtless rituals followed more from habit than from spiritual hunger. For Herbert's readers, the vivid personification of Love in this poem may sharpen an awareness of the humbling reality behind the familiar words and rites. The voice of Love is the same that speaks in Luke 12:32 (KJV): "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

The Examen Re-examined

by Deborah Smith Douglas



WHEN I FIRST LEARNED, in my Protestant childhood, how to pray a kind of "examination of conscience," it was a frightening and discouraging experience—a sort of inept, private confession of sin without guidance and without absolution. "Remember your day," my Bible School teachers urged us, "and all the unkind and naughty things you did and said, and ask God to forgive you for them, and promise to try to be better tomorrow." A harmless practice, one would think, and a valuable one in theory: Those good women were attempting to instill in our heedless young hearts the beginnings of compunction and remorse, to hold out for us the ever-renewed possibility of God's patient mercy.

However, the only other bedtime prayer we knew inevitably informed the whole idea of conscience smitten at bedtime: "Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray Thee, Lord, my soul to take." The terrible possibility of "if I should die before I wake" lurked darkly behind the urgent need to have sought and found all the day's sins before "I lay me down to sleep."

So, dutifully and anxiously, I would rummage through the day's events as I would have through a toy chest—but I was training myself to see only the broken toys. I searched diligently through heaps of beloved treasure, blind to everything that was not dented or torn or incomplete. It did not occur to me that God might delight, as I did, in the wholeness of what miraculously remained unspoiled; it certainly never crossed my mind that God might like to be present in my play. I never questioned God's odd preference for my worst, most fretful, selfish moments; naturally I had no idea how deeply I was shaping my image of God or my sense of myself.

So when, many years later, I was making my first individually guided Ignatian retreat,¹ and my director suggested that I "pray the Examen," I thought (with a sinking heart) that I knew just what to do. But by the grace of God, I was wrong.

I discovered that week a whole new way of offering my life to God, one day at a time—a whole new and redemptive way of finding God present in all things. Gradually, I learned to invite God to be with me in the remembering itself: Together we sorted through the day's nets. While I still grieved, as I had as a child,

over the precious things I had carelessly or willfully broken, I could also rejoice in discovering gifts received but perhaps not acknowledged—or even noticed—in the busyness of the moment. Most importantly, I was beginning to notice patterns and directions; I was beginning to move from self-scrutiny to discernment.

I learned, in short, that an examination of conscience—a single-minded, grim-hearted quest for sins—is not at all the same enterprise as an examination of *consciousness*, in which we look back over the day in order to find where God has been in it.²

After my retreat, in my growing appreciation for the Examen³ as a particularly rich and fruitful form of prayer, I sought to learn more about it. One of the first things one sees, on examining the Examen, is that the purpose is not, as I had vaguely assumed in my childhood, the mere nightly emptying of the day's trash, lest we die "in our sins" before morning. Neither is the Examen primarily concerned with what good or bad actions we have done during the day—not that that lets us off the hook in any way: The broader way of praying is not at all a more shallow way. It is not a bit easier or "nicer"—a sort of watered-down confession of sin with the sting of self-knowledge taken out. Indeed, it is far deeper and more costly, more conducive to profound self-offering and interior transformation, than the mere dis-spirited raking over of refuse that was my childish idea of "examining conscience."

On the contrary, the deep purpose—and effect—of the Examen is to change our way of seeing. The German film director Wim Wenders believes that that is how angels communicate the love of God to humans: "The angel realizes that the goal is not to talk into your ears, but to try and live in your eyes."⁴

If we pray the Examen regularly, generously, and courageously, God will come and live in our eyes. Gradually, we will begin to see ourselves, and understand our actions, in a whole new way. Eventually, by the grace of God, we will begin to recognize God in all things, to rejoice in the invitational, rela-

I was beginning to move from self-scrutiny to discernment

²George A. Aschenbrenner, S.J., "Consciousness Examen," *Review for Religious*, Vol. 31, 1972/1, pp. 14–21.

³*The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. and commentary by George E. Ganss, S.J. (St. Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1992), p. 38 (SpEx, 43).

¹At St. Beuno's College in North Wales. I am deeply grateful to Fr. Paul

tional love of God “unto whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid.”⁵

So how may we avail ourselves of this new way of seeing? We have only to begin.

Usually most helpful if prayed in the quiet just before sleep, the Examen takes about a quarter of an hour, and consists of five parts: first thanksgiving, then a prayer for illumination, next the examination of the day itself, followed by appropriate sorrow or delight, and finally, hope for the morrow.

The First Point Is to Give Thanks to God Our Lord For the Benefits I Have Received (SpEx, 43.2)

IN THE FIRST PART of the prayer, one simply remembers that all we have and are belong to God, who has loved us into being and will love us forever. It may well be, as the liturgy of the Episcopal Church reminds us, “right, and a good and joyful thing, always and everywhere to give thanks to [God],”⁶ but always and everywhere have a way of rushing past unrecognized: It is good to pause in our vulnerability on the rim of sleep, to rest into the amazing grace that surrounds us eternally. Specifically, we can give thanks for particular events or encounters or insights the day has brought us as gift. I have often been surprised to see what memories rise spontaneously to the surface of my mind in this first stage of the prayer—many times I have found myself delightfully saluting as pure gift a moment I otherwise probably would have completely forgotten.

The Second Is to Ask Grace to Know My Sins And Rid Myself of Them (SpEx, 43.3)

As preparation for the general overview of the whole day, one next prays simply for light, that God will enlighten our hearts. We ask for “grace to know”—and part of what that illuminating grace will reveal is, of course, the ways we have sinned. But we want to be open as well to an appreciation of the grace itself, an awareness of God authentically at work (and, perhaps at play) in the day’s events. Jesus promises that “The Holy Spirit whom the

⁵From the Collect for Purity, Holy Eucharist II, *The Book of Common Prayer*, (New York: The Church Hymnal Corporation and The Seabury Press, 1979), p. 355.

Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26, NRSV). Day by day, if we consent to it, the Spirit will teach us more and more about God, and about the ways we use God’s gifts. I often imagine this teaching as what Julian of Norwich called “showings”—it is as though God directs the beam of a flashlight to reveal what otherwise might remain hidden from us. This part of the prayer is simply asking for that light.

The Third Is to Ask an Account of My Soul from the Hour of Rising to the Present Examen, Hour by Hour Or Period by Period... (SpEx, 43.4, 5)

THIS THIRD PART is the heart of the prayer, the examination of the day in the light of Christ, grounded in thankfulness for all that God has done for us. In my experience this is a bit as though God and I were sitting side by side, watching clips of the day on videotape, from the moment I first woke up in the morning. It may be important to keep that somewhat detached view: As memories unwind, we are invited simply to watch them, not to leap in with judgments about ourselves or others. Too scrupulous or self-preoccupied an attention to our own failures and victories can miss the point as well: Remember, we are not seeking so much to identify good and bad actions (to sort, label, and dismiss them as though taking an inventory in a shop), as to look beneath the actions to the desires and feelings that lie underneath (to discern how we have responded to God’s loving presence in our lives).

For example, one might ask: In what I read today, or overheard on the bus, or saw in the evening news, was I drawn to God? Did I meet God in the joy or pain of others? Did I in some way bring Christ into my world? Did anyone bring God to me? Did I reach out to someone in trouble or sorrow? Did I fail or refuse to do so? Did something that happened to me today give me a keener sense of being loved, or being angry or tired, or needing God in some special way? Is there any concrete event of the day which revealed some part of my life that I am withholding from God? George Aschenbrenner, S.J. has pointed out, “In this third element of the examen we ordinarily rush to review, in some specific detail, our actions...so we can catalogue them as good or bad. Just what we shouldn’t do!... *The operative ques-*

ing in us? *What has [God] been asking us?* And only secondarily are our own actions to be considered.”⁷

Clearly, this form of prayer involves carefully and lovingly examining *everything* in the treasure chest, everything that’s been caught in the nets. This is no compelled or compulsive search for broken places to be rejected. Rather, it is but a prayerful exploration of *all* of our day, in order to discover not only what is in need of healing, but also what may have been neglected or ignored, or what might be celebrated.

*The Fourth Is to Ask Pardon of God Our Lord
For My Faults (SpEx, 43.6)*

A quiet, honest look at the day from this perspective will lead naturally into both gratitude and sorrow. Particular memories of how we have responded (or failed to respond) to opportunities to see or to serve God may fill us with regret, and we will want to express to God how sorry we are. True awareness of our brokenness and blindness is in itself, of course, a gift granted in love, so at the same time we can give thanks for that. We can also—and this is very important—learn to see and be grateful for the ways in which we *were* able to rejoice in or witness to the love of God. Perhaps something marvelous has happened: We heard from an old friend; we reconciled with an old enemy; the kindness of a stranger reminded us of goodness alive in the world; a line in a song half-heard on the radio suddenly spoke to our heart.

There *will* be something in your day, a Jesuit friend of mine gently insists to people under his direction, that you can be proud of. “There will be things,” he promises. “If you can’t think of anything, then you haven’t looked hard enough: Don’t move on before you think of what it might be. Then give thanks for this.”⁸

Even in the painful light of real sins named and offered to God’s forgiving grace, we can marvel at the way God constantly brings us home and steadily leads us closer to becoming the people God means for us to be. The English poet Elizabeth Jennings muses:

*The deep
purpose of
the Examen is to
change our way
of seeing*

*Prayer yet could be a dance
But still a cross. I offer small heartbreak,
Catch grace almost by chance.*⁹

“Almost by chance”—but not quite, of course, not really. The grace we “catch” is steadily poured out for us in the clear and unshakable divine intention that we participate ever more fully in the very life of God.

For this reason, we need never lose hope.

*The Fifth Is to Resolve, with [God’s] Grace, to Amend
Them (SpEx, 43.7)*

THE FINAL PART of the Examen is to rest in that hope for the future. Tomorrow, like yesterday and today, is in God’s hands. We can end our review of the day just past, our examination of our consciousness of God’s activity in the ordinary events of our daily lives, by looking ahead to the next day. Sometimes I end this final part of the prayer by recalling Paul’s declaration: “One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:13, 14, NRSV). Sometimes, I pray the prayer of St. Richard of Chichester: “May I know Thee more clearly, love Thee more dearly, and follow Thee more nearly, day by day.”

Thomas Keating, the Cistercian monk who has introduced thousands to the method of “centering prayer,” suggests that “our ordinary thoughts are like boats sitting on a river so closely packed together that we cannot see the river that is holding them up.” The boats are not only crowded together, but they also pass by us quickly, and we become confused and distracted in our efforts to pay attention to the boats and what is on them. But the really important thing to see and understand is not the boats at all, but the river. When we enter deeply and quietly into prayer, Keating suggests, “Space begins to appear between the boats. Up comes the reality on which they are floating.”¹⁰

⁹Elizabeth Jennings, “Prayer yet could be a dance,” from *Praying with the English Poets*, compiled and introduced by Ruth Etchells (London: Triangle Books, 1990), p. 45.

¹⁰Thomas Keating, *Open Mind, Open Heart: The Contemplative Dimension of the*

⁷Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness Examen,” p. 18. Emphasis added.

⁸Fr. Dermot Preston, S.J., in a booklet on the Examen prepared for use at

Very much the same dynamic is operative, I believe, in the Examen. As we allow God to draw our attention below the surface busyness (the color and activity of the boats) to the river itself, our hearts will be more and more deeply drawn into the fathomless reality of God. The purpose of the Examen is not simply to count the boats, or to judge either their condition or their cargo, but to get to know the river.

Did I meet God in the joy or pain of others?

The Examen, prayed deeply and faithfully, will enable us to take soundings, to learn the currents, to discern why the boats behave as they do. As we get to know the river, we will learn from experience that, for instance, staying too long in the shallows can be stagnating, that the ripples on the surface on a certain stretch warn of dangerous snags below, that if we go too fast in certain places, the boats will collide.

The better we come to know the river, the easier it will be to see the subtle movement of God in our lives, and the more joyfully and fully we can cooperate with God's plans for us. The more authentically we "offer small heartbreak," the more grace we will "catch."

The more we pray the Examen, the more we will allow ourselves to be "transformed by the renewing of [our] minds, so that [we] may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect" (Rom. 12:2, NRSV).

book reviews

BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX: SERMONS ON CONVERSION. Translated and with an Introduction by Marie-Bernard Sâid, O.S.B. Cistercian Publications, Cistercian Fathers Series #25, WEMU Station, Kalamazoo, MI 49008, 1981. Pp. 285. Paperback, \$7.00. ISBN 0-87907-925-8.

To hear the Word of God I believe you have come For he has the words of eternal life, and the hour is coming (if only it were only here!) when the dead shall hear his voice, and those who hear him shall live, for life is his will. And if you want to know, his will is our conversion There is no true life except in conversion and . . . there is no other means of entering into life

The conversion of souls is the working of the divine, not the human voice. . . . It is from him alone that we must hope for results. We must ask him for it, so that our voice may be in harmony with the voice of majesty. May I suggest then that you prick up the ears of your heart in order to hear this inner voice and that you make an effort to hear God speaking within rather than the man speaking without. Nor do we have much difficulty in hearing this voice; the difficulty is rather in stopping our ears from hearing it. For that voice offers itself, presents itself, and never ceases to knock at the door of each one of us.

ONLY THE HARDEST OF HEARTS will not melt from the penetrating words of Bernard of Clairvaux. Called by one of his closest friends, "God's fisherman," Bernard has been catching souls for God for almost nine centuries. No less alluring today, his sermons are masterpieces of writing, psychology, and doctrine that captivate the listener and turn the heart to the heart of the Word. Bernard's unique mastery of the sacred scriptures and his application of God's word to the needs of his listeners earned