

Examination of Consciousness

(Joe Colletti, PhD)

The Examination of Consciousness is a spiritual practice that helps us reflect on God's activity during our daily life. During this time we can ask God to help us examine ourselves. The scriptures teach us that God probes the souls of individuals and examines their actions. "I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve" and "For a man's ways are in full view of the LORD, and he examines all his paths" are a couple of verses that underline this fact.¹ The scriptures also teach us to invite God to search our souls in order to help us live a life of Christian virtue. "Test me, O LORD, and try me, examine my heart and my mind; for your love is ever before me, and I walk continually in your truth" and "Show me your ways, O LORD, teach me your paths" are a couple of verses that underline this fact.²

The later part of an evening serves as an appropriate period of time of for this type of reflection. As a matter of fact, making an examination of consciousness during Compline can be advantages. Compline means completion and thus it is this prayer office that helps complete the circle of the day which often happens mid or late evening. It is associated with darkness and thus what is hidden and unknown in our lives. Also, there is an emphasis on discovery that includes finding out how God had been present throughout the day.

When darkness and night settle in after the light of the day has ended, we may feel a sense of physical rest. Compline, however, may further that sense of relaxation by creating a sense of contemplation. Within the context of an Examination of Consciousness, contemplation can best be understood related to the experience of meditation. Being meditative means to listen and reflect which are important self-acts within the act of Examination of Consciousness. Being contemplative means to accept and rest in what you heard and learned through meditative reflection.

There are two passages of scripture that I like to associate closely with an Examination of Consciousness. The first one emphasizes a strong desire to have God probe our soul and examine the actions of our day.

¹ Jeremiah 17.10; Proverbs 5.21.

² Psalm 26.2; Psalm 25.4

My soul yearns for you in the night,
my spirit within me earnestly seeks you.³

The second passage emphasizes a strong sense of satisfaction while God probes our soul and examines the actions of our day.

My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips
when I think of you on my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night,
for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy.
My soul clings to you,
Your right hand upholds me.⁴

A popular method of an Examination of Consciousness has been given to us by Ignatius of Loyola.⁵ This method is meant to help us discover the voice of God within our own heart and to experience a growth in familiarity with God's will. In his "Spiritual Exercises," he outlines five primary activities which are as follows:

1. we should thank God for the benefits received that day;
2. we should ask for grace to know and correct our faults;
3. we should pass in review the successive hours of our day noting what faults we have committed in thought, word, deed and/or omission;
4. we should ask for God's pardon; and
5. we should purpose amendment.

While focusing on these activities, there are several questions that Ignatius of Loyola encourages us to ask that can be summarized as follows:

1. How has God been present in your day?
2. How did God speak to you today?
3. Do you feel you were resisting God today?
4. How do you feel you were cooperating most fully with God?
5. In what ways do you believe God may be calling you to a new awareness?
6. What needs healing in your life?

³ Isaiah 26.9

⁴ Psalm 63.5-8

⁵ Saint Ignatius (See The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius, translated and with commentary by Pierre Wolff)

Thus, an Examination of Consciousness evolves around two major activities: 1) discovering how God has been present throughout our day; and 2) discovering those areas in our lives that need further growth and healing.

As already noted earlier in this article, an Examination of Consciousness can be understood within the context of the relationship between meditation and contemplation. Listening and reflecting are important self-acts within the act of meditation, and accepting and resting in what you heard and learned through meditative reflection is contemplation. However, accepting and resting in what you heard and learned is not always easy. Asking God how you were resistant and what needs healing do not always lead initially to serene solutions.

There have been several other verses of scripture that I have linked closely with an Examination of Consciousness. These verses are filled with words that express inner feelings like loneliness, distress, and affliction. Other words express outer acts such as moaning, weeping, and repentance. These verses came to me by way of memory or reading the scriptures during my times of examination. They include:

I am weary with my moaning;
every night I flood my bed with tears;
I drench my couch with my weeping.⁶

Turn to me and be gracious to me,
for I am lonely and afflicted.
Relieve the troubles of my heart,
and bring me out of my distress.
Consider my affliction and my trouble,
and forgive all my sins.⁷

Have mercy on me, O God,
according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy
blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity,
and cleanse me from my sin.⁸

⁶ Psalm 6.6.

⁷ Psalm 25.16-18

⁸ Psalm 51.1-2

There are also several other verses of scripture that I have linked closely with the verses noted immediately above. These verses are filled with words that express that express God's comfort and healing. In reading them I hear God saying

Weeping may linger for the night,
but joy comes with the morning.⁹

When you are disturbed, do not sin;
ponder it on your beds, and be silent.¹⁰

I have called you by name, you are mine.
When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
And through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
When you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
And the flame shall not consume you.
For I am the Lord your God,
The Holy One of Israel, your Savior.
...You are precious in my sight,
And honored, and I love you.¹¹

Discovering and hearing the voice of God within our own heart, as Ignatius of Loyola reminds us, leads to cooperation with God and healing from God for ourselves and others. An Examination of Consciousness provides us with an opportunity to hear all what God has to say to us, particularly if we missed something during the day. We can rest assured that God will speak to us each day. The question is whether we will take the time out to make sure that we heard everything that is said to us. Who would not want to hear God saying "You are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you" and as a result respond by saying "I love you too."

⁹ Psalm 30.5b

¹⁰ Psalm 4.4.

¹¹ Isaiah 43.1b-4.