THE ECOLOGICAL EXAMEN

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Entering a new world of Ignatian contemplation

Along the coast of Oregon at the Nestucca Wildlife Sanctuary, there are old-growth Sitka Spruce over 500 years old. I imagine that they were around when St. Ignatius was a boy, and I feel connected to him through these soaring wonders. Sitting at the base of these towering creatures has long been one of my favorite places to pray. As I stare out at the Pacific from this sanctuary, I can easily follow Ignatius’ advice to find God in all things—especially in creation.

The daily examen and Ignatian imaginative prayer are two effective channels for cultivating greater mindfulness of God’s presence in one’s interior life. These practices are rooted in the belief that we experience God’s movements in our feelings, moods, actions and desires—that is, in our lived experience as incarnate beings. God reveals himself in our emotions as much as he does in our clear and distinct ideas. In them we recognize God’s ceaseless invitation to come closer, to be more like God, to be one with God. We also become conscious of our resistance to God, which arises from sin in ourselves and in the world around us. These same spiritual tools can be used to cultivate ecological sensitivity and a heightened awareness of God’s immanence in the natural world.

Creation Re-Examened
Using the technique of the examen with an ecological lens allows us to reflect prayerfully on the events of the day within this larger world. We witness our relationship with creation, and we detect God’s presence and direction for us within it. Further, just as the goal of any examen is a discerning heart, so the purpose of an “ecological examen” is to recognize ourselves as creatures in and of the world: How is God inviting us personally to see creation, and how are we responding?

The five movements in the ecological examen parallel the traditional examen. We begin with thanksgiving and gratitude for all creation, which reflects the beauty and blessing of God’s image. We ask: Where was I most aware of this gift today? Second, we specifically request to have our eyes opened by the Spirit as to how we might protect and care for creation. Third, we review the challenges and joys experienced in this care, asking: How was I drawn into God today through creation? How was I being invited to respond to God’s action in creation? Fourth, we ask for a true and clear awareness of our sinfulness, whether it be a sense of superiority and arrogance in our relationship to creation or a failure to respond to God in the needs of creation. Finally, we end in hope: asking for hope in the future, asking for the grace to see the incarnate Christ in the dynamic interconnections of all creation.

I always conclude my examen with the prayer of Jesus: “The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (Jn 17:22–23). This prayer invites conversion and reminds us that all serious solutions to the ecological crisis of our time include the demand that we human beings change our thinking, relationships and behaviors so that we may be woven into the unity of creation.

The examen, like the Spiritual Exercises, progresses to the point of exhorting us to a total commitment to the life of Christ. Inspired by the Spirit, looking at the events in our lives and on the earth from an ecological perspective moves us to deepen our commitments, to return to daily life with enthusiasm, inspired to transform, heal and recover the natural environment of which we are a part.

In my experience, the practice of the ecological examen has led to profound experiences of gratitude for the gifts of creation, especially those that might otherwise be missed in a merely spiritual process. This examen teaches us that our ultimate purpose, “to praise, reverence and serve God,” entails a Christian environmental response as part and parcel of everything we do. Indeed, such a response becomes part of our service to each other, to our communities and to God.
Like the traditional examen, the ecological examen leads us through three steps: awareness, appreciation and commitment. Awareness involves taking off the blinders that keep us focused on our own self-centered pursuits. From this awareness comes appreciation, as we cannot appreciate what we are unaware of or not in relationship with. We learn to see as intrinsically valuable those things we may previously have only tolerated and treated as objects. Creation becomes an indispensable teacher rather than an opponent to be dominated or a resource to be exploited. Suddenly we find ourselves learning from and imitating our fellow creatures: the dung beetle in our kitchen compost; the flippers of humpback whales as a model for our spinning turbines.

Finally, such graced appreciation leads us to committed action. We move beyond recycle and reuse, beyond stewardship to restoration and renewal. Healing the earth begins, according to Thomas Berry, C.P., by seeing ourselves and all creation as a communion of subjects instead of a collection of objects.

**Prayer Reimagined**

Similar graces come from using our imagination in prayer to contemplate scenes from the Gospel. In the Ignatian method, we are invited to engage the Gospels with all of our faculties, but most often this engagement is limited to taking on the role of another human being. By entering into Ignatian contemplations in non-human roles, however, we not only increase our sensitivity to creation but open our hearts to new depths of insights offered by the Spirit. Thus we are invited to enter into the scene as if we were part of the natural world—seeds scattered on rocky soil or the oil that anoints Christ’s feet. There are literally hundreds of opportunities in the Gospels and seemingly endless examples when we include the Hebrew Scriptures and the psalms, and these contemplations cannot help but provoke feelings of gratitude and compel us toward action on behalf of creation.

While directing the Spiritual Exercises last summer, I sat with a retreatant who was spiritually spinning. He was on the fifth day in the third week of the month-long retreat, preoccupied not with Christ himself but with the intensity of Christ’s suffering, speaking again and again of the gruesomeness of his contemplations. As we came to the end of our conversation, I invited him to place Christ in the tomb by the end the day. Though I rarely give specific directives like this, I felt compelled by the Spirit. He agreed. Then I suggested that he imagine himself not as a human witness to this scene but as the tomb itself. Again he agreed. When we met late the next day, he tearfully said four words: “Christ rose within me.” Deeply consoled, he went on to recount the powerful contemplation he had experienced as the tomb. He described himself trembling with life and energy, an inert tomb quickening with essence, like a desert blooming after rainfall, an anonymous, indifferent place of death suddenly shooting color skyward. His
contemplation of the tomb itself allowed him an even deeper experience of the risen and life-giving Christ incarnate.

New insights arise when we allow ourselves to be confronted by heretofore unimagined questions: Can we see and feel how the ground beneath the cross was the first chalice to receive the blood of Christ? Can we offer comfort to Christ imagining ourselves as the oil that anoints his feet—softening scaly cracks, rejuvenating calloused, impenetrable heels? What does transformation feel like if we imagine ourselves as the water turned to wine at Cana? Contemplating such scenes evokes courage and a new kind of reverential humility for the gift of creation—the same virtues Jesus cultivated in following the will of God by becoming part of the natural world.

Combining this new language of images with the wonder and grace of creation also has the power to heal our own hurt or broken selves. A few years ago, when directing an eight-day retreat, I invited a woman to pray using the parable of the growing seed (Mk 4:26–29). She was grieving deeply over her inability to conceive, and for many years suffered from a profound sense of shame and guilt. Entering into this contemplation as the soil, she experienced a pervasive sense of healing. She returned the following day filled with joy to recount how she “had given birth to God’s Word...a living Word!” She spoke of the new sense of being both a disciple and mother. (I have often wondered if any physical healing came from this spiritual grace. Whether or not it did, her healing gave her a mission, and in living this mission she remains a healing presence in the world.)

**Ignatian Inspiration**

Looking at the life of Ignatius, as recorded in the saint’s autobiography, we can see how God certainly enlightened him through the Trinity in creation: “One day while reciting the hours of our Lady on the steps of some monastery...he saw the Holy Trinity under the figure of three [organ] keys.” The fullness of the chord and the harmony drew forth tears. He could not stop talking of the Trinity and spoke of his visions of rays, the manner in which God created the earth and the luminosity of creation.

Further, we cannot ignore Ignatius’ experience at the Cardoner River, which offered the most powerful single experience of God he ever had: “While he was seated there, the eyes of his understanding began to be opened...everything seemed new to him.” Whether it was on the rooftop of the Jesuit curia in Rome or gazing at the starry heavens above Loyola, he beheld the stars as well as “the other things on the face of the earth” with new eyes (Spiritual Exercises, No. 23).
Right up to the end of his life Ignatius referred to these unifying visions of the created world in the text of the *Spiritual Exercises*, his letters, the *Constitutions* and in his decisions of all kinds; and the prayers he left behind irrevocably echo creation. I believe that Ignatius would delight in the beautiful irony that he, who gazed so lovingly on the stars, is himself composed of stardust. Yet such, we know, is the truth. The stars that taught him so much about reverence, awe and wonder are composed of the very same elements of which he himself is composed—God delighting in the very same elements in each.

When I ask retreatants where they find God, they tell me stories of mountaintop views, the beach at night, a river they have long sat beside or old-growth Sitka at the edge of the Pacific. Never once has anyone told me they find God next to a polluted river, a mountaintop removed for mining or a trash-strewn alley. Today, in a world that can no longer sustain the dichotomies of spirit versus matter, or ecology versus spirituality, it is up to us—perhaps especially those graced by the gift of Ignatian spirituality—to reconcile these mislabeled opposites for the life of the world—to indeed find God in all things.

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