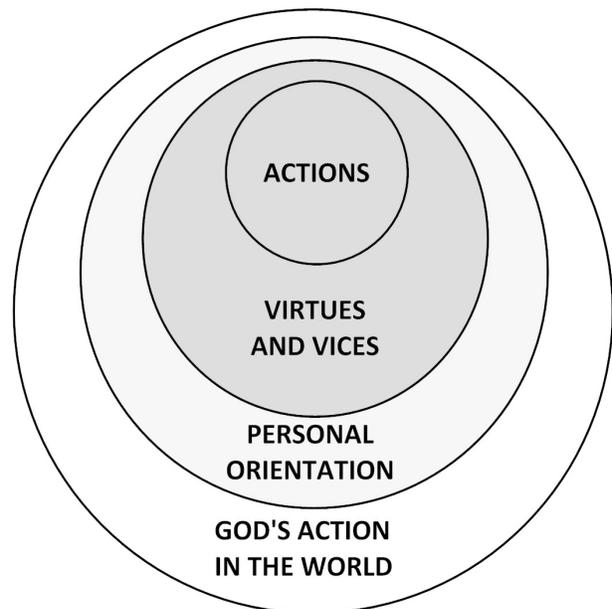


## Examination of Conscience and Human Maturation:

As persons mature, they become able to access their complex selves in ever broader and more integrated perspectives. Their self-examination becomes more probing and powerful. In brief one can trace four stages in this maturation: to begin with human persons are able to examine their own individual actions. Later, in addition they are able to group these actions together in patterns and thus access their characteristic virtues and vices. Later still they are able to group together these virtues and vices in the broader perspective of their overall orientation towards or away from God. Finally they are able to integrate their own selves within a world in which each self and its inner movements are integrated within God's plan and activity on behalf of the whole world. Let us tell the story of this unfolding development.



**Examining one's actions:** As a youngster trained for my first confession (some 70 years ago) what was accessible to me at that stage of my life was actions and numbers. The content of my confession was like a laundry list, and my self-examination consisted in trying to come up with a list as accurate as possible. I lied three times, I disobeyed five times, I fought with my little sister once, I used swear words ten times, I did not say my prayers five times, and so on. That was the level of self-reflection available to me at that time, and the type of rudimentary self-examination which I was taught. Some people today are quite sophisticated as they assess how well they perform in their profession or career, but when it comes to self-examination of their relationship with God, they may have scarcely moved away from this primitive pattern.

**Examining one's virtues and vices:** As I entered my adolescence, I began to realize that my actions generally express my habitual dispositions. Some actions, good or bad, recur with regularity. These patterns helped me discover strong points and weak spots, good habits and bad habits, habits which both flow from and shape my behaviour. This was firmed up when I joined the Society of Jesus and as a novice daily practised the examen prescribed in the first week of the Exercises, i.e. the particular examen. In their quest for perfection, novices were expected to become aware of their virtues and vices, strengthening the former and eliminating the latter. We were given examen beads which we would use to see whether we were making progress or not. I might be working on charity or humility or patience – one virtue at a time -- and every time I committed a fault against that virtue, I was to move one examen bead. At the end of the day I would count the ones I moved, and at the end of a given period of time I would be able establish a trend. The more naive among us would get the notion that we could attain

the virtues one by one through this process, with sainthood just around the corner. But we were quickly disabused of such ideas.

In sum, at this stage of increasing human maturity, looking at individual actions was not enough. We grouped them in patterns that expressed our habitual dispositions towards good actions (virtues) or towards sinful actions (vices). Dealing with these habitual dispositions gave us a better handle on our individual actions and what they signified, and a better sense of the work of self-improvement ahead of us.

**Examining one's awareness:** As I matured in my life, I became more aware that the crucial point in my self-examination was not this or that particular virtue or action but the overall orientation of my life towards or away from God, an orientation which encompasses and touches everything about me, including my actions and habits. This natural part of human maturation was facilitated by a practice of prayer based on the Ignatian Exercises and by the study of philosophy and theology.

In addition there was a change afoot in the way of teaching the examen. It began to be referred to the awareness examen, in other words the examination of one's consciousness as a whole. The content of the earlier examen of conscience, individual actions and habitual patterns of behaviour, was not set aside but included in this awareness examen. This broadening was the result of the work of many spiritual guides who sought to retrieve the full dynamics of spiritual life as described by Ignatius Loyola to present them to their directees in a life-giving way. The examen presented in the first week of the Exercises is for beginners. The later parts of the Exercises, especially the two sets of rules for discernment, offer a more subtle and probing way of self-examination. Orientation, fundamental option, consolation and desolation became the significant words in this new approach.

Self-examination now meant our looking at the entirety of our awareness to discover what is going on within it as a whole, encompassing in our self-examination our actions good and sinful, our virtues and vices, our feelings positive or negative (known as consolations and desolations), and our general orientation towards (or away from) God which these actions, habits, and feelings reveal. One cannot achieve this in a 15 minute session, but over a period of time and with regular practice one can begin to take the measure of one's inner spiritual stance.

This general orientation towards or away from God comes to a focus in the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, principally the virtue of love. These three virtues relate us directly to God. As I become present to the complexity of my own consciousness, I ask myself what are the key issues – or the single issue – which characterize the inner conflict between my resistance to God's love and my openness to it. Being able to answer this question is of deep significance in my human journey; it is a grace that should evoke great gratitude.

Generally, one can presume that the prevailing orientation of a person who regularly practices awareness examen is towards rather than away from God. A prevailing orientation towards

God, however, can coexist with areas of my being which lag behind or are moving away from God. When there is harmony between my overall orientation towards God and the various areas of my psyche there emerges a feeling of peace, well-being known as consolation. If this harmony is lacking, the opposite, known as desolation, emerges. And I need to know what triggers this desolation. I also need to differentiate between consolation/desolation which arises from my bodily or psychic state and that which arises from my spiritual relationship with God. I also need to distinguish between genuine consolation and the false consolation which starts on a high note but leads me away from God.

As I move into this form of self-examination, I focus more and more on how God is present in my life, how God speaks to me through events and circumstances, what are the areas where God appears to be present and to be absent. This leads me beyond a simple view in which actions are either permitted or forbidden by God to a more subtle one in which I search out the better way, namely those actions or decisions to which God is inviting me. There are many paths I can follow without breaking my relationship with God, but which is one which God wants for me and to which God invites me. I engage in ongoing discernment. In what ways is God prompting me to service?

Does all this exclude examining my actions and my virtues/vices? By no means. It sets that examination in a broader and more helpful context.

**Examining God's action in the world:** To this point our self-examination has been concentrating on our own selves and its overall orientation towards or away from God. The focus at this point generally is "How is God speaking to me? Where is God calling me? How am I responding? How am I doing?" My own self is still very much in the picture, albeit in an integrated mode that encompasses not only my entire awareness but also those elements of the outer world to which my awareness points. But that integration, if it limits itself to the individual self, is truncated. We live in a network of personal relationships and communities within a world which is the broader theatre of God's actions and promptings. Seeking God's promptings as they move me personally is not enough: God also prompts everyone else within the world which surrounds me. God acts in me, but God also acts in the world. I am not only an initiator of actions and movements, but am called to enter into the actions and movements started by others who themselves are in harmony with God's Spirit active in the world. I function as a member of the human community. I must examine not only how God is acting within me but how God is acting in the world that surrounds me. What is God's action, God's purpose? Who are the people who are carrying forth God's project of integral human salvation? How am I called to insert myself into what God is doing? The answer to that question will differ from person to person, but it is very important that each person discovers the answer for himself or herself.

I can best recount what this means in practice by using a corporate example. The awareness examen described in the third step has been a part of Jesuit practice, both individual and collective, for a long time. Collectively, the Society has been trying as best it could to discover how God was inviting it to respond to the needs of the times. Here we are with so many men,

trained in a diversity of ways, with considerable institutional resources at our disposal. What are the needs out there and how can we best respond with what we have? Sixty or seventy years ago that would have meant the choice to open new apostolates and schools and missions under Jesuit leadership.

Our last two General Congregations (world wide assemblies that elect a new general superior and set priorities and ways of proceeding for the Society) have moved us a step beyond this. Our institutional and human resources are diminishing. Rather than asking what God wants us to do, with the presumption that we are to be major actors in that action, we are seeking to discern where God is active in the world, in what directions the Risen Christ and his Spirit are leading all sorts of people within our complex world. We are called to begin our discernment not by asking what we can do but by reading the signs of God's activity in the world, so that we might align ourselves with that activity. The Society of Jesus is in the process of de-centering itself.

This significant shift in how we discern communally is essentially linked to a shift in how we discern personally. This personal shift both precedes and follows the institutional shift. Everyone who practices the awareness examen, not just Jesuits, are called upon to spend time not only on how God is moving within their own individual awareness but also on how God is moving in the world that surrounds them. That is an essential part of our dialogue with God and our response to God's promptings. Once we have taken that step, the quality of the integration which marks our self-examination has taken a leap forward. The momentum of human maturation over a period of time will lead us towards this new approach, but in this final stage we will be doing this broader examen deliberately, in full realization that we are part of a project of salvation which is all-encompassing. Our examen becomes more and more decentered, with its focus not so much on ourselves as on God.

This broader awareness examen is last in the usual developmental sequence of a human being engaged in maturation, but it is the first in God's plan and God's intention. As we know from the inaugural meditation of the second week, the Contemplation on the Call of the Eternal King, Christ has a project of salvation with which we are all invited to participate. What role are we to play in that project? That is the essential question. It is a question centered on God and not on our own paltry selves.