AWARENESS EXERCISE[1]

by
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1. Introduction

The Awareness Exercise[2] is a spiritual exercise to help one find God in all things. The modern understanding of the Awareness Exercise is rooted in the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola,[3] especially in the exercise called the Contemplatio.

The spirituality of this exercise, the Contemplatio, is the spirituality of finding and loving God in all things. The Contemplatio assumes God's love for us and it is an aid to help us in gratitude to grow in our love and service of God. This exercise has a contemplative quality to it and is focused on our inner experience of the Trinity. How is God "drawing" me (John 6:44) in my existential awareness or consciousness? Hence, the name Awareness or Consciousness Exercise. In the Awareness Exercise we are not focused on our conscience but on our consciousness, i.e., on our awareness of what is going on in our interior experience. Thus the Awareness Exercise is related to the discernment of spirits.

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[1] These notes for the use of seminarians at St. Augustine's Seminary, Toronto, draw heavily on the work of the following Jesuits who have written about the Awareness Exercise: John Veltri, John English, Joseph McArdle, Douglas McCarthy, George Aschenbrenner, Michael Ivens and Joseph Tetlow.

[2] The Awareness Exercise is also commonly known as the Consciousness Examen or Awareness Examen.

[3] It is rooted in three spiritual exercises in the Spiritual Exercises of St,. Ignatius of Loyola. These three exercises are: General Examination of Conscience (#32-43, especially 43), Daily Particular Examination of Conscience (#24-31), and the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God (#230-237, known by its Latin name Contemplatio). The first two exercises are similar to what is known as the Examination of Conscience. The Examination of Conscience is usually done in preparation for receiving the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) and focuses on faults and sins, sorrow for them, and the need to eradicate them. Hence the Awareness Exercise is broader and more foundational than the Examination of Conscience. Our focus in the Awareness Exercise is not primarily on faults and sins but on the presence and action of God in our lived experience.

The discernment of spirits is about detecting among the various influences at work within me which ones lead to God and which ones lead away from God and how I am responding to them. The Awareness Exercise, then, is a daily focused exercise of discernment in a person's life. Our focus in the Awareness Exercise is on the presence and action of God in our lived experience.

This spiritual exercise asks the questions: how has God been present to and active in me today in the people, events and circumstances that I have experienced? How have I responded? The St. Augustine's Seminary Spiritual Program states it this way: "The focus of this exercise is your growing awareness of the presence of Christ in situations, events and persons during that day, and the nature of your response to this presence". [emphasis mine]

Each of the underlined words is important and will be explained in greater detail in subsequent sections. But for now:

- presence - this spiritual exercise is interpersonal, that is, it is about the mutual presence of one person (risen Christ) to another person (you).
- situations, events and persons - how is the presence of Christ mediated to me during the course of my day? The answer is in the persons, events and circumstances that I daily experience.
- your growing awareness - Christ can be present to us, but we may not recognize or pay attention to Him. This exercise helps us become aware of Christ's presence and to grow in that awareness. Further, it is your awareness that is important, not someone else's.

We are not contemplating the awareness of St. John of the Cross or of St. Therese, as helpful as that may be in other times of prayer.

- response - the reason we want to grow in our awareness of Christ is so that we can live in closer union with Him, recognize His will and respond to Him by uniting ourselves to what He is doing in our life, in the lives of the people we encounter and serve, and in the world.

This spiritual exercise practiced faithfully can with the help of God's grace form you into a contemplative in action, that is, it will enable you to find God in all things and so unite yourself to the work of the Trinity in the world. This spirituality is an apostolic spirituality, that is, it is a mysticism of service rather than a bridal mysticism, although the two cannot ultimately be separated.

The Awareness Exercise takes about 15 minutes and is performed daily towards the end of the day.

2. Praying on Our Experience

The Awareness Exercise is about finding God in all things, i.e., about becoming aware or conscious of the presence of Christ in the people and events of my daily life. The content of this form of prayer is our lived experience.

What does it mean to pray on our experience?

To answer this question it may be helpful to place it in the context of other forms of prayer.

First, there is Liturgical prayer. The content of this prayer is the liturgical symbols, words and actions. It is through these mediums that one encounters the presence of the risen Lord. This is foremost in the case of the sacrament of the Eucharist. Under liturgical prayer we would also include the Liturgy of the Hours. We can call this form of prayer in which the Lord addresses us as the Ecclesial Word.

Secondly, there is Scriptural prayer. The content of this prayer is the inspired word of God in the Sacred Scriptures. It is through reading, meditating and contemplating the word of Scripture that one encounters the presence of the risen Lord. Lectio divina and praying with the imagination are traditional methods of this form of prayer. We can call this form of prayer in which the Lord addresses us as the Prophetic Word.

Thirdly, there is prayer on our experience. The content of this prayer is the people, events and circumstances of my daily life. It is through these mediums that one encounters the presence of the risen Lord. One performs, as it were, a Lectio divina on one's own experience. That is, one reads, listens to and mediates on what one's experience has been. How is the word of God speaking to me here and now in my daily experience? We can call this form of prayer in which the Lord addresses us as the Existential Word.

As with the first two forms of prayer, praying on our experience is crucial to any growth in holiness. St. Teresa of Avila writes in her Autobiography: "There was nothing I understood until His Majesty [God] gave me understanding through experience." Karl Rahner writes that with the breakdown of cultural Christianity in the West, "the devout Christian of the future will either be a 'mystic', one who has experienced something, or he will cease to be anything at all." Ladislaus Boros, a spiritual writer, has said. "The Christian must seek his great God everywhere, even in the slightest things" [emphasis mine]. Another spiritual writer speaks of the "catechism of our experience." Above all, we think of Luke 2:19 where the evangelist writes: "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." What things? The things that were happening to her, what she was experiencing. Mary is the great model of praying on our experience.

The theology behind this prayer is that God is always present to us, always addressing us. He is always disclosing himself to us and offering himself in relationship to us. He is always acting in our life. He does this in the concrete. This form of prayer is Incarnational.

One spiritual author has said if God is not in the concrete, He simply is not there. If I cannot find God in the concrete circumstances of my life, is then a truly spiritual life really possible? God is present to us at all times and in every area of our life. God is present at the deepest dimension of our experience. It is there that He draws us. Jesus says: "No one can come to me unless the Father draw him" (Jn 6:44). The Awareness Exercise pays attention to this drawing of the Father.

God's presence and action in our lives does not have to be felt. He can work at the deepest levels of our mind, soul, psyche and spirit. We may not be aware of this. (Mk 4:26-29). Yet, God's grace can also be experienced. Otherwise, we would not be able to discern His will. St. Augustine writes: "Thanks be to Him who is desired before He is seen, whose presence is felt, and who is hoped for in the future." (Sermon 24.1, emphasis mine).

3. "Pay attention so that you may live," Is 55:3

The Awareness Exercise is about paying attention to our experience in order to detect the presence of Christ. A word about 'paying attention' is in order.

The first step, the sine qua non of any spiritual growth, is to pay attention. We cannot be led by the Spirit if we do not first pay attention to His promptings. Before we can respond to the Spirit we must first pay attention. In one translation of Is 55:3 we read, "Pay attention so that you may live." If we are to live in the Trinity, if we are to be "Trinified", we must first pay attention to the presence and action of the Trinity in our daily life. Bernard Lonergan, a Canadian Jesuit theologian, writes that the foundational precept to all self-transcendence is "Be attentive." There can be no self-transcendence into the love of God if we do not first pay attention.

We pay attention to our experience. But we do not pay attention to our experience to find ourselves. We are seeking to find God in all things. The Awareness Exercise is a prayer, a spiritual exercise; it is not a psychological test. It is not self-introspection or navel grazing.

It is certainly not self-perfection. It is not focused on me, but on God, and God's presence and action in my daily life. It does not end in myself. It does involve some reflection on my interior life, on my thoughts, words, actions, desires, feelings, urges, motives, moods etc. But these are all simply mediums to help me encounter the presence of Christ in my life. The focus of this prayer, and the goal of this prayer is to encounter Christ and to unite myself to Him as He reveals himself to me and acts in me in the people, events and circumstances of my daily life.

The Awareness Exercise, then, is done in the presence of Christ and seeks to deepen that presence. It is about intimacy, intimacy with the Lord. One spiritual writer has said: "Next to the Eucharist, the Awareness Exercise should provide the occasion for the most intimate encounter of the day with Jesus."

4. <u>Two Analogies</u>

The Awareness Exercise is a prayer for developing awareness of our relationship with God as it is played out in the day to day routine of our lives. The atmosphere of this spiritual exercise is relaxed, conversational and reflective. One spiritual writer uses this analogy: this prayer in its tone is like a young married couple who, after the dishes are done and the kids put to bed, sit around the kitchen table with a pot of tea and share with each other what their day has been like.

The Awareness Exercise is a reflective conversation with the Lord about my experiences that day in order to become aware of where the Lord was present to me and to savour those moments. It also includes resting in the Lord with those experiences that were difficult or

uncomfortable or where the Lord seemed absent. Bring these experiences to the Lord as well.

The quality of this spiritual exercise is one of relaxed intimacy. Fr. Michael Prieur suggests: “Get comfortable with God: have a cup of tea or a glass of wine, relax and listen.” Allow God to manifest to you where He was present to you this past day.

Although there is a very simple method to this prayer, like all methods in practice, it is to be adapted by each individual according to his personality and needs.

A word about method in prayer. A prayer method at first can seem mechanical and awkward. One spiritual writer uses the analogy of learning to sail a boat. At first it is mechanical and awkward. You have to keep one hand on the rudder, the other on the boom, one eye on the sail, the other on the water etc. The first few times may not seem very enjoyable. But once the method has become second nature to you, you forget about it. It serves its purpose of freeing you up to enjoy the wind in the sails taking you for an enjoyable sailboat ride.

The same with method in prayer. At first you may be focused on the steps involved. But very soon the steps become second nature to you; you forget about them. They allow you to be led by the Spirit blowing in the sails of your life. You are freed up to focus on and move with the presence and action of the Holy Spirit.

5. Method of Awareness Exercise[4]

The usual time for doing this spiritual exercise is towards the end of the day since one is reflecting on what happened during that day. It is good to do it approximately at the same time each evening inasmuch as that is possible. The Exercise takes about 15 minutes. For it to bear fruit, it needs to be done faithfully every day.

Different spiritual writers speak differently of what one is seeking in the Exercise. Some speak of becoming aware of the presence and action of the Trinity, others of the presence and action of Christ, still others of the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. Obviously, there is no contradiction in these options. I have used all three so far in this explanation. For the sake of consistency in presenting the method, I will use primarily the language of the Holy Spirit, but at times it is more appropriate to speak of the Trinity or of Christ.

There are 5 steps in this prayer. Usually Step 3 is at the heart of the prayer. But if the Spirit moves you to pause longer in any of the other steps, then follow the Spirit. The 5 steps can be listed under 5 headings:

(1) Thanksgiving

(2) Light

(3) Review

(4) Response

(5) Tomorrow

[4] I have attached a one-page (double-sided) summary of the method of the Awareness Exercise which can be detached for easy reference.

The Awareness Exercise is a help to increase one's awareness or sensitivity to the Spirit working in one's life and to provide one with the enlightenment needed to co-operate and respond to this presence.

(1) Thanksgiving

Begin by getting comfortable. Recall that you are in the presence of the Trinity, that the Father desires to give Himself to you through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. The Trinity beholds you. Thank the Trinity for your existence and ongoing life. We can thank the Trinity for the gifts of Creation, Redemption and Sanctification. Other gifts that we may spontaneously be grateful for are our vocation, the Eucharist, our talents and abilities, significant relationships, the air, the sun – whatever comes to mind. Besides these gifts, given the focus of the Awareness Exercise there may be some favours or some people specifically in the past day that immediately come to mind; they may be meaningful or seem unimportant. Do not choose what you think you should be grateful for, rather, by merely looking over the day see what emerges, what you notice, even slightly. Allow gratitude to take hold of you. Praise and thank God.

A word about thanksgiving. St. Ignatius once said that the most abominable sin he could imagine was the sin of ingratitude. He knew that an awareness of God's goodness and generosity is the foundation of our relationship with God. Once we recognize God's goodness, we spontaneously feel gratitude.

Also, gratitude is the foundational motive for all of our service to God. If we are grateful to God we will offer to Him all that we are and all that we have for His service. If our gratitude cools, our service will collapse into empty routine.

As our spiritual life deepens, we become more and more aware that all we have is gift (1 Cor 4:7), given to us far beyond anything that we might expect or deserve.

Sometimes we might find ourselves in a mood of resentment or depression where a feeling of gratitude is hard to muster. At that time, it is all the more important for us to express thanks to God. Not to pretend to feelings we do not feel, but to acknowledge, at whatever level we can, the truth of God's goodness to me.

(2) Light

Ask the Holy Spirit for a spiritual and interior knowledge (light) of how the Trinity has been present with you this day. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you what God wants you to see.

We need to ask the Holy Spirit to enlighten us about what has transpired today because we are only too aware of our own blindness to see Him in the persons and events of our day. We can be ignorant of the movements of our heart, rationalize our motives, deceive ourselves about what is going on. To truly know ourselves is not something we are able to do on our own. We need to ask the Holy Spirit for the light that can reveal us to ourselves. Knowledge of God necessarily involves knowledge of self. In this way we can come to understand the ways of the Trinity in our life.

(3) Review

This is a review of the past day in order to find God in all things of that day. Recall the persons, events and circumstances of the day, allowing the Lord to show you where He was meeting, encountering, challenging, being present to you in all things. One can begin by first recalling the persons, then the events, then the circumstances. In each of these you can focus first on your words and actions, and then on your thoughts and feelings. Where were the signs of the Spirit? How did you respond?

What interior events were significant for you? Notice what stands out even slightly, such as joy, pain, turmoil, increase of love, anger, harmony, anxiety, freedom, enchainment, isolation, presence of God etc. Which ones were leading me toward God, and which were leading me toward myself? Where and when did I sense I was being led by God's Spirit? How did I respond to these persons, events and experiences?

(To assist you in reflecting on finding God in all things of your day I have listed a series of questions on side 2 of the summary page on the Awareness Exercise.)

The review of our day is not simply earnest introspection, it is prayer. It is going through our day with God, attentive to our inner feelings and thoughts and desires which is where we experience God's call in the midst of everyday activity.

In the spiritual life it is important that the head and the heart be integrated. Some fall into the danger of reducing the spiritual life to thoughts. Others fall into the danger of reducing

the spiritual life to feelings. Both are important and need to be paid attention to. This Exercise does that. We also mentioned that the Father draws us to Christ. He does this through holy desires. This Exercise assists us to pay attention to and discern those desires.

This Exercise can be done anywhere – in a plane, on our sick bed, out for a walk, etc. As such, at those times when we may not be able to celebrate Mass or say the Office, we can find intimacy with the Lord each day by praying the Awareness Exercise.

Eventually, we look for interior experiences of consolation and desolation which enable us to discern the presence of the Trinity and how we are to respond. It is important to know whether we are in consolation or desolation because when we are in consolation we are likely to make good decisions, and when we are in desolation we are likely to make bad decisions.

(To assist you in knowing whether you are experiencing consolation or desolation I have included Appendix A with some indications of each.)

When we sense the presence of the Holy Spirit in this Exercise we pause and savour the experience allowing the texture of His presence to deepen within us. If we are having difficulty sensing the presence of the Holy Spirit, we simply bring this person, event or circumstance to the Holy Spirit, expose it to Him and wait. Desolation, although not necessarily right away, eventually gives way to consolation.

Through the Awareness Exercise the Holy Spirit becomes our constant companion and guide. A beautiful prayer of St. Augustine comes to mind in this regard (this prayer is not necessarily part of the Review):

"Breathe into me, O Holy Spirit
that all my thoughts may be holy.
Act in me, O Holy Spirit
that my work also may be holy.
Draw my heart, O Holy Spirit,
that I may love only what is holy.
Strengthen me, O Holy Spirit
to defend all that is holy.
Guard me, then, O Holy Spirit
that I always may be holy."

(4) Response

Once we have reviewed our day we may have an awareness of the dynamic of God's offer and our response or lack of response that has been operating in our life that day. The fourth step is our present response to that awareness.

Insofar as we have discovered God's presence and our graced, free response, our present response is one of gratitude and wonder for the work of God in our soul. Genuine freedom always comes as a surprise to us, because it involves a sort of self-transcendence that we know we do not have in ourselves. When we discover that in our day, we need to praise God for it. And so we thank God for the persons, events, circumstances and unselfish attitudes in ourselves that have mediated His presence to us.

Conversely, when we discover our lack of response and self-centeredness during the day, then our present response is remorse and contrition. Contrition is not to be confused with shame. Contrition moves us out of ourselves and towards God. Shame simply moves us deeper into ourselves. So we ask God for His forgiveness in failing to respond to His presence.

It can also happen in reviewing our day we become aware we are being nudged to focus our attention on something in particular, for example, some recurring selfish response. Discuss this with Jesus. What kind of response is required, e.g. desire for change, some specific action to be taken...?

(5) Tomorrow

We conclude this prayer by asking the Holy Spirit to help us be more attentive and responsive to His presence tomorrow. For example, you may need to pray to overcome something, to be more sensitive to God's activity in your environment, to let go, to deal with some issue, to be open to conversion in some area, to make some decisions, to act against some destructive forces in the various worlds of your life.

We live the spiritual life one day at a time. With trust in God we ask for His "bread" for the needs of tomorrow. We do not look at changing our whole lives, we simply look at what we want to change tomorrow, and ask God's help for it.

We conclude this prayer in trust, surrender, and confidence in God, and in making an offering of ourselves to Him. God's love and presence will be with us again tomorrow and we desire to respond more fully.

6. Fruits of this Exercise

If practiced daily, it is not long before certain effects start to be experienced. After a week or so the following fruits may be noticed:

- a deeper peace within oneself
- a greater awareness of God at work in my life through other people
- a greater awareness of God at work in the lives of others
- a deeper sorrow for one's sins and lack of response to God
- a yearning to praise and thank God more
- a more contemplative approach to one's life in and through activity
- a deeper awareness of the presence of God in one's life
- a deepening sense that one's vocation is a personal service to the Lord
- a more intimate sense of being united with the Trinity in one's ministry.

7. Finding God in all Things

The Awareness Exercise, as we have said, helps one to find God in all things and so become a contemplative in action. It is an apostolic exercise, that is, it is based on the revelation that the Trinity is at work in the world and invites us to join Him in that work.

We are called to be united to the work of the Trinity in the world. This is a mysticism of union and service.

The spirituality that is the basis of the Awareness Exercise is the spirituality of finding and loving God in all things. While there is an analytic dimension to the Exercise, the analysis is to lead to contemplation. The Awareness Exercise is all about love, God's love for us and our love for God. This Exercise helps integrate these two loves. The faith assumption underlying this Exercise is God's love for us, the absolute and unconditional love by which God loves us before we love Him (1 Jn 4:10), the love by which God teaches us to love. The fruit of this Exercise is to assist us to grow in our love for God, to make a radical self-offering of ourselves to God. The grace of this Exercise is to grow in loving in the way God Himself loves.

Where do these two loves meet? Where does the exchange of these two loves take place? The answer is in the persons, events and circumstances of our everyday life. God, for His part, gives Himself to us in love through all things; and we, for our part, give ourselves back to Him in love through all things. As we have said earlier, God gives Himself in the concrete. That is where we find and love Him. St. Ignatius in the Contemplatio speaks of this reality in two points: (1) love ought to manifest itself in deeds rather than in words; (2) love is a mutual communication.

The first point shows that 'action' is a defining characteristic of love; without expression in acts, love lacks an essential completeness. God's love for us is complete; He has shown

His love for us in the Magnalia Dei (the mighty deeds of God). These mighty deeds can be seen in Creation, Redemption and Sanctification. They can also be seen in God's particular gifts to me, as well as in the circumstances of my daily life – no matter how seemingly small or insignificant. "The Almighty has done great things for me; holy is His name." Our response is to love God in return in deeds of service; that is, to show our love in the concrete as well.

The second point of mutual communication indicates that behind, within and through these deeds of love one ultimately gives oneself. God offers Himself to me, shares His very self with me in concrete deeds. I am invited in turn to offer myself to Him, to share my very self with Him in concrete deeds.

What these two points come down to is that God shows His love to me in and through everything; in turn I aspire to find and love God in everything. This is the love of friendship. It is the desire of the beloved to give in return.

God's love for us expresses itself in action for us; including in the persons, events and circumstances of my daily life. In this action God shares what He has and (as far as can be) gives of Himself. This is the model of our love, which in turn expresses itself in deeds of service, in the gift of all I have and possess and indeed in the gift of my very self back to God.

The Awareness Exercise is to lead us to make a radical offering of ourselves to God.

This self-offering is beautifully expressed in the prayer of St. Ignatius:

> "Take, Lord, receive all my liberty
> my memory, my understanding, my entire will;
> All I have and possess you have given me,
> I return it all to you.
> All is yours,
> Dispose of it wholly according to your will;
> Give me only your love and your grace,
> That is enough for me."

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APPENDIX A

ON CONSOLATION AND DESOLATION

Am I experiencing spiritual consolation? One or other of the following phrases can help to determine this:

- the experience is moving towards God
- leading to an interior acceptance of others
- delicate and gentle
- leading to a realistic knowledge of self
- a sense of God's presence with a deeper faith perspective
- if painful or dry or sad it is somehow oriented toward God:
  for example, it is associated with the realization of how one's compromise with evil has been contributing to Jesus' suffering in his people, or there is an appropriate concern over some event that needs God's help, etc.
- meaningfulness and a sense of hope
- tension may still exist but underneath there is a sense of faith, hope or love
- not turned in on self.

Am I experiencing spiritual desolation? One or other of the following phrases can help to determine this:

- turned in on self
- God is not part of my consciousness in my activities
- The experience is moving towards the sensual and material
- I feel alone and separated while at the same time desiring to be with God
- I feel sad, separated as it were, from God.
- lack of caring, everything seems hard and difficult
- I feel hyper and happy but there is a lack of delicacy, a fanatical quality to it with my disordered tendencies influencing my actions
- it is a cover-up for seeking myself
- the experience is moving me away from God
- I am not experiencing the flow of happenings with clarity or perspective.

If I am in desolation, I might begin to examine myself with God's Spirit and I attempt to wait patiently until God's presence returns. The following questions may help to identify the causes:

- is my sinfulness getting in the way again?
- Have I been negligent in my dealings with God, taking God for granted?
- How might God be helping me grow in maturity through this?
- Is there something that I am resisting? Am I refusing to grow?
- Am I being taught that all is gift; that God, not I, is the source of true consolation? Was I being dependent on the consolation of the Giver rather than the Giver of consolation?
- Perhaps I am being invited to carry the cross or to be rejected with Jesus?

Dialogue with God … Here I might express whatever needs to be expressed: thanksgiving because all is ultimately gift, wonderment when I can't understand, possible sorrow if I have been the cause in any way, seeking help so that my desolation does not influence my daily decisions and responses.

When in consolation, be grateful and express this to God, and prepare for times of desolation …

When in desolation, examine oneself, wait patiently, seek help from God to act against the desolation so that one does not act inappropriately or make unsuitable decisions …

Jot down in your journal what you have discovered.

Some Questions For Step 3

To Help Me Be Attentive To What Is Happening To Me And In Me,
That I May Find God In All Things.

1. Did I feel drawn by the Lord any time today?
   - a companion - in class - a good book
   - an event - nature

2. What have I learned about the Lord and his ways today?

   - in ordinary circumstances - in stray moments

3. How did I meet the Lord today? - FEARS - JOYS

   - work - misunderstanding - suffering

4. Where have I found it difficult to find the Lord today?

5. How did the Lord's word come alive to me today in

   - my prayer time - scripture - other readings - liturgy

6. In what ways have I encountered Christ through members of the community?

7. In what ways have I been a sign of God's presence and love?

8. How have I felt moved to go out of myself in concern for the
   - lonely - discouraged - sad - needy

9. How am I becoming more alert to God at work in the world?
   - in signs of the times

10. Have I experienced a growing awareness of
    - my being loved
    - my sinfulness

11. What area of my life do I feel most called to conversion?