EXAMEN: FORMATIVE PRAYER TOWARDS
CONTEMPLATION-IN-ACTION

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I. INTRODUCTION

A story depicting how St. Ignatius considered the examen is frequently told:

The saint asked point blank of a father whom he happened to meet, how often he had examined his conscience that day. The father answered, "Seven times." "So few?" Ignatius asked, even though the day was not far advanced.¹

For the founder of the Society of Jesus, it seemed that the examen as a method of prayer was central and quite inviolate. During all the last years of his life, he is said to have made the examen as each hour of the day struck, and also of the night if he were awake. Pedro de Ribadeneyra, an intimate friend of Ignatius, more precise:

He has always kept this habit of examining his conscience every hour, and of asking himself with careful attention how he had passed the hour. At the end of it he happened upon some more important matter, or a task prevented this pious practice, he postponed the examen, but at the first free moment, or the following hour, he made up for this delay.²

In the training of his men, Ignatius also laid greater stress on the examen and considered it of greater importance than meditation.

² Ibid. 66.
In the Jesuit constitutions (Cons 342), where there is question of the hour of spiritual exercises which the scholastics should add to their attendance at Mass, although mental prayer is not explicitly mentioned, it is stated with precision that they should examine their conscience twice a day. He was likewise flexible in adapting and abbreviating daily meditation for various reasons but not the examen. Sometimes formal contemplative prayer was dispensed with but never the examen.

All these observations lead to the conclusion that the Ignatian examen is the central daily experience of formal prayer for the Jesuit.

It is the connection between examen and religious identity which makes examen central. The practice of examen focuses and renews one’s unique and specific faith identity. It makes the Jesuit confront his identity in Christ—that religious identity which is an imitation of Christ in the charism of the Ignatian vocation. The daily practice of examen means a constant deepening and development of this religious identity.

The intent of this paper is to explore how the examen deepens and develops the Ignatian vocation. The thesis is that the examen is a central prayer whose daily and intensive dynamics forms the person towards the ideal of Ignatian spirituality, a contemplative-in-action. To elaborate this thesis would require two analyses.

First, an analysis of the ideal of Ignatian spirituality will be made. The dynamics of contemplation-in-action will be traced out. Its meaning in the reality of the life of a Jesuit will be presented. Second, an analysis of the Ignatian examen will be made. A better understanding of its dynamics will show how it is the central prayer used by the Jesuit to attain the Ignatian ideal.

II. DYNAMICS OF CONTEMPLATION-IN-ACTION

I acclaim you, harsh matter as the divine milieu, charged with creative power, as the ocean stirred by the Spirit, as the clay moulded and infused with life by the incarnate Word.

Teilhard de Chardin, S.J.

A. IDEAL OF IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY

*Simul in actione contemplativus:* this is the heart of the Ignatian
experience, the central factor of Ignatius’ spirituality. In the full
serenity of his sanctity, during his last years at Rome as the wise
organizer of the Jesuits, he confesses that his devotion, that is his
insight in finding God, was ever on the increase to the extent that
strays and everywhere he could find Him (Autobiog, p. 93).
Many penetrating insights into this core aspect of the spirituality
of Ignatius has been inherited from Jeronimo Nadal. Nadal was
considered to be his alter ego, the man who best understood the
spirit. Among his contemporaries he was acknowledged to have a
deep understanding of Ignatius and a better knowledge of his spirit
than any other.
Nadal is the source of the often quoted statement concerning
the distinctive grace of Ignatian spirituality:

This manner of prayer was granted to Ignatius by a great and special
privilege, that in all things, actions, conversations he felt and contem-
plicated the presence of God and the attraction of spiritual things. He was
contemplative in action, something he expressed habitually in the words:‘
He must find God in all things.’

Contemplation-in-action’ is the most satisfactory expression
which describes the revolutionary break which Ignatius made with
set traditions of the religious life of his time. In order to under-
stand this distinctive grace better, it is helpful to compare with
the other traditions of religious life.
The Benedictine formula of ora et labora indicates a subordina-
tion of action to contemplation. Prayer and work are not equated.
The accent is on the ora—the contact with God in contemplation.
The labora does not include any and every kind of activity. Only
activities that are humanly required to support the single-hearted
search for God in prayer are included. Monastic occupations such
farming, handicraft or study are carried out as necessary and
meaningful interruptions of liturgical prayer. Only a certain amount
of a certain kind of work or action is necessary; everything else
superfluous and a hindrance.
The Dominican formula of contemplata aliis tradere indicates a
combination of contemplation and action. Contemplation is to
lead to and support action and vice versa. In this formula, the 
apostle shares with others the fruits of his contemplation, the 
benefits received from God in prayer. First and foremost he is a 
contemplative whose apostolic work is an organic expression and 
gives life to his contemplation and study.

The Ignatian formula of simul in actione contemplativus does 
not indicate a subordination nor a coordination. There is no put-
ting together of two things in anyway whatsoever. In this formula 
simul does not have its usual meaning of ‘joining together’. Rather 
it takes a special meaning of oneness or identity. There is an iden-
tity or a ‘state’—a contemplative in his very action.

Ignatius not only suggested something new with regard to the 
relationship between contemplation and action; he also changed 
the established meaning of the two terms. Contemplativus refers 
ot to a particular spiritual activity or exercise but to a basic 
quality. This quality can be described as an intimacy with God and 
awareness of the divine presence. It involves an attitude/disposi-
tion/sensitivity to God. In actione refers not only to apostolic or 
external work but to everything one does, be it prayer or labor, be 
it mental or physical.

There is no mixture of two things. There is only a ‘state’ of intim-
ate oneness with God, a total commitment to Him in Christ 
which can and will issue in activity whether spiritual or corporal, 
depending on what God expects at any given moment. This ‘state’ 
is not identified with nor reducible to either spiritual or corporal 
activity.

St. Ignatius does not ask the mind to distract itself from the 
present activity to become aware of God by a sort of division 
which would be intolerable and a source of countless anxieties. 
This would mean a desertion of activity. At every moment there is 
but one thought which cannot at one and the same time provide 
for prayer and activity, if prayer and activity were two distinct 
occupations. There is no semblance of duality, instead there is 
oneness which is a spiritual attitude which causes one to ‘find God 
in the very thick of activity. Simultaneous with being totally ab-
sorbed in activity whether prayer or labor, one is able to sense the 

Prakash, 1979) 5.

presence of God.

For St. Ignatius, mystical graces will not be given in prolonged meditation but they will accompany or follow the effort of active charity. This activity, far from disturbing one’s union with God, is the privileged means of maintaining it. The grace-filled mystic of Manresa was always turned towards God even when he seemed to be doing something else. He raised himself to God in any circumstances.

Union with God, since it is established at the core of one’s being not only issues in activity, but so penetrates and transforms all activity and the whole person, that every experience becomes an experience of God. All action not only springs from contact with God but is itself a deepening of that contact. This is what makes Ignatian mysticism radically apostolic.

It was the great illumination at Manresa that gave Ignatius the new understanding of seeing activity as the privileged place for meeting the Divine. At Manresa, through grace and prayer he met the triune God as the creator of the world and the lord of history to is constantly at work. The creator wishes to be glorified by creatures in the place and time of his creation, that He sent His son to take possession of the world and transform it into His kingdom.

Ignatius in his particular way of proceeding was a faithful follower of his Eternal King. Surely Christ himself was the perfect contemplative-in-action:

- He had the intense awareness of the Father, which while it did not receive him of the felt need for intimate contact in solitary prayer, nevertheless enabled Him to find God in all things—in the beauties of nature, but above all in men and women of every sort and condition, in experience both pleasant and painful and in mortal anguish.

- This is the grace of La Storta when God the Father placed Ignatius Christ under the standard of the cross. More and more the Christ whole being with all its activity was imbued with the Spirit Christ, directed to the Father.

- As with the founder, so also with his sons in the Society of...
Jesus. Nadal emphasizes that the graces of Ignatius are the very graces also granted to each and every Jesuit:

Hence we believe that this privilege granted to Father Ignatius has also been granted to the whole society; we are confident that the grace of such a prayer and such a contemplation is offered to all of us in the society, and we assert that it is bound up in our vocation.8

Sanctity in the Ignatian experience is finding God in all things. The full maturity of the Jesuit vocation is seen in the contemplative-in-action who strives in his every way to see, to know and to experience Christ, to love Him and to make Him loved, to serve Him in every way and in all things and to follow him even up to the cross; that in everything to be alive to God in Christ.

B. KEY ELEMENTS OF CONTEMPLATION-IN-ACTION

As it is the central Ignatian ideal, it would be useful to seek a deeper comprehension of the meaning of ‘finding God in all things’. One way to do this is to trace out key elements which, put together, would constitute this religious ideal. The bases for determining these key elements are two texts from St. Ignatius.

The first text is the *Ad Amorem*—the Contemplation to Attain the Love of God (SpEx 230-237). This contemplation is the culminating point of the Spiritual Exercises. It leads one to the faith-experience of finding God in all things. The second text is from the Jesuit constitutions (Cons 288). This is considered to be one of the most eloquent descriptions by St. Ignatius of his own religious ideal. This is the best portrait sketched by the founder of the contemplative-in-action. From these two texts, five key elements are drawn out and described.

INTERIOR KNOWLEDGE

On the bank of the river Cardoner, Ignatius received “so great an enlightenment that everything seemed new to him” (Autobiog, p. 39). One mystery of faith in which he was granted great understanding was creation: “the manner in which God had created the world was revealed to his understanding with great spiritual joy”

autobiog, p. 38). He developed a faith-view of the world, a unified view of creation, that all things are in God. All things are to be seen in the light of God, in their basic truth.

Ignatius saw "like rays descending from the sun" (SpEx 237) a spiritual movement from the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to created things. Through these created things shine the glory and majesty of Him without whom they are nothing. It was Ignatius' special mystical insight to see that "our eternal and highest God dwells in created things, giving existence and conservation to all of them. His own infinite being and presence." God is present in a special way in one's neighbor who is made in the image and likeness of God.

This Ignatian insight is synthesized in the second and third cents of the Ad Amorem. The second point reflects on how "God dwells in his creatures" (SpEx 235). He is present in his gifts. This presence effects created things to be what they are. Without Him, they are nothing. God lives within His gifts and is present in everything. Things are holy for they contain God. The third point considers how "God works and labors in all creatures" (SpEx 236). He is present as an ever active God continuously working in all things. The rush of life is indicative of His sacred toil. This critical Ignatian insight sees God working in human history, caught up in the work of redemption; thus making secular history, sacred.

Since God is present and active in all things, it is a distinctive Christian grace to ask for "interior knowledge" (conocimiento interno) (SpEx 233) of God's very presence in all things. This is to consider the power of God in His creatures, manifesting the works of His all-powerful hand and the infinite magnificence of gifts. A man of the Spiritual Exercises grows in grasping more and more the splendor of God's creative power in all things.

Interior knowledge is an elevation of consciousness, a growth in openness, that kind of human perception and experience involving understanding, sensibility and feeling. It is a process of not
merely watching something from the outside but being called to enter into a meaning which is dynamic. A man grasps the meaning only when he himself is grasped by what he knows, when he possesses a knowledge from within, when he senses not something other and objectified that is occurring, but a process which he shares and is living through.

Conoscimiento interno corresponds to an awareness that exists between two persons that know each other in intimate relationship. It is profoundly personal in its subjective participation and comprehensive in its penetration of human sensibility. It is not speculative but felt knowledge. A better known and more typically Ignatian expression is el sentír y gustar de las cosas internamente—"inner awareness and relish" (SpEx 2). The Ad Amorem aims at this sensitive unifying consciousness in which a man deeply becomes what he knows and by which he grows into whatever personal depths this life is to possess.

Interior knowledge of what? Of the goodness with which God has surrounded a person in all things. It is an assimilation of the good within life, but the good as interpersonal—as from God and for the person. It is to perceive all human history as good and to perceive that it is of God. It is to experience the good as gift. Interior knowledge is an overwhelming experience of a man that has been loved by God in all things.

The Spiritual Exercises culminating in the Ad Amorem aims at personal commitment to God which establishes a supernatural relationship that is both a state and an awareness. This is an awareness of a deeper level of reality of oneself and in all things and of God's presence and activity there. In other words, it involves, in all things, a being totally alive to God in Christ.

Among the five key elements of contemplation-in-action presented in this article, Interior knowledge is the most Ignatian. Either of the four other key elements: Sense of Devotion, Spirit of Gratitude, Constant Conversion, Availability can be drawn and given greater prominence in other religious traditions. But that God works, labors, struggles and redeems in and through all things and having an inner awareness and relish of this presence, that is not so common a tradition. As the critically Ignatian insight.

serves as the essence of ‘finding God in all things’.

Thus the contemplative in action in the most fundamental sense is exhorted to “continuously seek God our Lord in all things... loving Him in all things and all of them in Him” (Cons 288). He is to perceive with consolation and relish, in all things and in all activity, the sweet breathing of God’s love.

SENSE OF DEVOTION

One testimony describes the perpetual state of Ignatius’ spiritual life as: “nearly always he was directed to God, even if at times he seemed to do something else.”15 In his autobiography the saint states in all simplicity: “each time and hour he wanted to find God, he found him” (p. 93).

The phrase he uses is simply to find God. ‘What Ignatius has in mind is not so much finding God in all things but rather finding God beyond all things, and then finding all things in God.’16 His way of proceeding is not a via causalitatis (attaining to God through creatures) but via negationis (affirming God beyond all creatures) culminating in the via eminentiae (discovering all creatures in God).’17

There is a primordial affirmation of God as absolute. It is not merely finding God through creatures but finding Him in Him; in His absolute reality. There is the experience of God as God which activity is at the same time its privileged and expendable means. The experience of the full splendour of the Divine Majesty is beyond and is not contingent of activity.

This affirmation of the absoluteness of God is the rock bottom condition of the Spiritual Exercises. “Our one desire and choice is to be what is conducive to the end for which we are created—to praise, reverence and serve God our Lord...” (SpEx 23, Principle and Foundation). Every exercise begins with the preparatory prayer “that all intentions, actions and operations are directed purely to the praise and service of His Divine Maj-

- aliveness to the absoluteness of God is synthesized and

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16 Sharp, Alive, 17.
17 Ibid. 18.
integrated in the fourth and final point of the *Ad Amorem*. In the first three points the focus is on what God has done in and through His creation. The last point goes beyond the things God has created, and directs one to God as He is, in Himself. It directs one to a joy simply in what God is: “the sun and the fountain” from which constantly flow “justice, goodness, mercy, love, etc. . . .”, attributes of His very nature.

The contemplative-in-action loves and surrenders to God, not primarily because of the good things He has given nor for His creation but simply because of what He is in Himself. To find God in all things means to live with the absoluteness of God ever before one’s eyes.

Ignatian religious ideal is predominantly mystical—an involvement into the mystery of the absoluteness of God. In Ignatian terminology this key element is known as *devoción*. It expresses Ignatius’ attitude of profound respect of the absoluteness of God. And because God is absolute, one must be totally dedicated to Him in love and service. Directing everything to the greater glory of God is known as ‘pure intention’. This means doing only what pleases the Divine Majesty. Thus it is the concrete manifestation of one’s affirmation of the absoluteness of God above everything else.

For the saint, ‘finding God’, ‘*devoción’*, ‘pure intention’ are essentially interjoined:

All should make diligent efforts to keep their intentions right not only in regard to their state of life but also in particular details. In these they should aim at serving and pleasing the Divine Goodness for its own sake . . . (Cons 288)

Sense of Devotion means finding God beyond all things as manifested by pure intention. This is a key element in the dynamics of contemplation-in-action. It is considered as “that spiritual foundation which contributes more than any other means to the preservation of the proper spirit in the Society.”

Ignatius desired very much that all members of the Society have

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"an intention completely right, pure and unmixed, without any mingling of variety or stain of self-will and self-interest . . ."20

Even in the midst of things which are earthly or base, one loves them all for God our Lord, who must be loved in all things and to whom alone should be directed the whole weight of our love . . . 21

All activity is accomplished for the sole love of God. Contemplation-in-action signifies an interior surrender of the whole heart to the absoluteness of Divine Providence.

CONSTANT CONVERSION

A special characteristic aspect of the spiritual training given by Ignatius is the daring of the trials and experiments to which he subjected his novices. The period of early formation is simultaneously an apprenticeship in living the life which was characteristic of the institute and a test of one's suitability for that life. Ignatius' institute did not intend a life of monastic living within enclosure or cloister. Rather he intended a form of active apostolic life which would be spent largely mingling with people. Hence he devised these trials as an apprenticeship in living out actively in the world as religious. He explains:

If someone enters a well-ordered and organized monastery, he will be more separated from occasions of sin because of the cloister, tranquility and good order there than in our Society. It does not have that cloister, quiet and repose but travels from one place to another. As he travels about, he must associate with men and women both good and bad. Such associations require greater strength and experiences as well as greater graces and gifts from our Creator and Lord.22

The contemplative-in-action seeks God not in the quiet and repose of the monastery but in total absorption in the thick of activity. Activity has a dynamism which causes sin to proliferate spontaneously. It attaches one to oneself all the more strongly as

22. Note 7, chap. 4 in Ganss, tr., Constitutions, 96.
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It permits one's personality to set itself up and to develop in a movement which of itself, closes again on its own riches. Even if it is undertaken for love of God, no work can ever be followed up without being the occasion, more or less confusedly entertained, of self enjoyment.

Hence in the seeking of God in all things, an important demand is continual mortification. They are like surfaces of one reality at once death and resurrection.

For Ignatius, the radical abnegation of a person is a fruit which ripens slowly, to the rhythm of successive abnegations which the activity determines. Each created thing may become for the apostle an occasion of an inner struggle. The contemplative-in-action does not evade any of them, but follows up by a purification through abnegation, mortification and confidence in God, the development of activity begun for the love and service of the Divine Majesty.

It is in this effort to have a union with God in the very thick of activity that there resides for St. Ignatius that mortification and abnegation of the will, which he considers as the foundation of spiritual progress. “In all that concerns the spiritual life his progress will be in proportion to his surrender of self-love and of his own will and interests” (SpEx 189). Only the individual who has leapt out of all disordered attachment to the world and his own ego is capable of truly finding God in all things.

This is clearly sketched in the portrait of the contemplative-in-action: “... stripping off from themselves the love of creatures to the extent that is possible...” (Cons 288) Without this self-denial and continual mortification, constant recollection of the presence of God is not possible. Abnegation is the indispensable means towards union with God.

Interior immolation of the will, continuously consumed in the furnace of the eternal love of God is the negative meaning of Constant Conversion. In the portrait cited above, the line which was quoted continues: “... in order to turn their love upon the Creator of them ...” The positive meaning of Constant Conversion is metanoia: turning oneself more fully and totally to God.

24. Ibid., 20.
This turning to God needs to be a constant process because there are many ‘disharmonies’ (i.e., sinful attachments, certain rigidities of character, absolutized inhibitions, habits, prejudices) that constantly pull one away from God. These come in the way of a total openness to God and all that comes from him. Ignatius’ painful, scrupulous and even obsessive purification at Manresa made him very aware of all these.

The whole first week of the Spiritual Exercises is a dynamic process that tries to liberate the person from all these ‘disharmonies’ and ultimately from one’s selfishness which is the root of all of them. The process continuously moves the person to a “positive selfishness that is alive to God and apprehends everything in his

. . in this light, it can be said that one can find God in everything even in one’s negativities (i.e., sin, failure, loss, psychological sounds, darkness, doubt, meaninglessness). For in realizing them, one becomes conscious of his insufficiency and of the need to reach out to God in total dependence. Even in sin, God is gifting the person in ways that lead him back to God and roots the person in Divine Mercy.

Toute est grace — everything is a gift from God, absolutely everything. All is grace. “We must not even be afraid to add that sin is grace. In fact, although it is evil and the source of evil, it is reintegrated into the movement of redemption and becomes possible of serving it.”

The contemplative-in-action takes a personal responsibility in moving from a life of sin and carelessness to a stance which recognizes God first as a significant factor, then a dominant factor, and as the sole factor of one’s life. This on-going conversion exists in an ever growing capacity for life and love of God in all things. Dying to self (mortification), a person is able to be alive to ~metanoia) and find Him in all things. Amidst the sinful human condition, Constant Conversion is a constitutive element of contemplation-in-action.