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“The Examen Prayer: The Witch, the Watch, and the Wallet”

There is a Broadway musical that some of you may have seen entitled *Wicked*, which is the prequel of the ever popular *Wizard of Oz*. In *Wicked*, named after the woman who would become “the Wicked Witch of the West”, there is a song called “Dancing through Life.” A few lines will take you more deeply into a very shallow character who says that we must “learn to live ‘the unexamined life’... Dancing through life, Skimming the surface, Gliding where turf is smooth, Life’s more painless, For the brainless, Why think too hard? When it’s so soothing, Dancing through life, No need to tough it, When you can sluff it off as I do [...and my favorite line] Life is fraught less, When you’re thoughtless, Those who don’t try, Never look foolish.”

Learning to live the unexamined life? How many people do we know that do just such a thing? Or worse, how often do we find ourselves running from one thing to the next, and days, months, and years go by without ever even thinking about the things that really matter to us? Or our own vocational discernment?

One of my dear mentors, Msgr. John Cippel, has been saying for decades that we live in a “non-reflective society”, in other words people do not reflect upon their lives, their purpose in life, or the repercussions of their actions. Twenty-five years ago I didn’t know what he meant by this because I wasn’t reflecting too deeply myself, but now I get it, or at least I am beginning to get it!

And how much more so now with the iphone, ipad, ipod, ibuds, blogs, “friending,” tweets, snapchat, insta-gram, emails, apps, etc. filling our every moment – guilty as charged! They say the average person is touching their smart-phone 110 times per day (I downloaded an app called “checky” to keep myself in check). Thus with all of this noise and busy-ness filling our lives we must ask ourselves the questions: are we reflecting, praying, and growing?

A great way to check our growth is to do a daily examination of our life – to reflect upon the thoughts and actions of the day. To ask: “How did I do today God?” On New Year’s Eve I have taken up the practice of asking the Lord to reveal to me the three or four virtues that He wants me to work on over the course of the New Year, and then once or twice a day I try to call these virtues to mind and see if I am living up to them. Believe it or not, we grow more when we focus on the positive, that is, the virtue for which we are striving and not just the vice to avoid. This keeps the focus on what Christ is calling us to, rather than the negative, where did we mess up? The virtues lead us to embrace the good and as we form healthy habits and quite naturally more and more avoid the bad.

I want to offer a very simple version of a consciousness examen, or what we can call the “examen prayer” which keeps us alert to constantly striving to grow in grace and ultimately in

relationship with our loving God. These five very simple steps can be remembered with the acronym GRACE.

- **Gratitude:** When we stop to think about our day or our life, there is so much to be thankful for. A grateful heart is a happy heart. The grateful person's cup is half-full and contented. Thus, this first step is key and foundational, be grateful!
- **Request for Light:** Request/ask God to reveal ourselves as we really are; helping us to see the real me, not the me who I want others to see, not the self inflated egotistical me, and not the me that has a negative self image, but the me that God created, the me who is a beloved child of the Father. This request keeps us balanced in our judgment of ourselves, not judging too harshly, but also not justifying our sins. Thus we are asking God for a realistic view of ourselves as He sees us.
- **Actions and Attitudes:** This is when I do my New Year's resolution. How have I been in those areas that I want to grow in, for instance: courage, prudence, wisdom, charity/generosity, purity of thought and intention, kind hearted, respectful, moderate in eating and drinking, etc. You get the idea, name your three or four virtues you want to work on, which are probably all inclusive, and then reflect on your day in light of them for a moment. Having already requested enlightenment from God, I can assure you that something will pop up.
- **Now Chart your course for the future, challenge yourself, think about what you could have done differently, a change for the better, or even Contrition and Confession if needed:** Enough said, lots of options there for the C, where do I need to go from here?
- **Enthusiasm:** Having reflected on my day and the desired change of course needed, I now move forward enthusiastically to carry out this resolution. Notice that I am now making New Year's Resolutions daily, since realistically no resolution lasts long if we don't recall what it is and why we are doing it.

GRACE: Gratitude, Request for Light, Actions and Attitudes, Chart your Course, and Enthusiasm. I have made small cheat sheets (we'll call them Holy Cards!) to keep in your Breviaries to help you remember!

The unreflective priest or seminarian lacks any real depth of spirit or character, or for that matter, even real meaning in their life. Another way to think about being reflective is to ask ourselves the question: What am I reflecting? Or better: Who am I reflecting? Do I reflect Christ to my brothers, teachers, formators, family, co-workers, or as Pope Francis would say, to people on the periphery? For this reason our Blessed Mother Mary is often symbolized by an image of the moon. The moon has no power or light in and of itself – it only reflects the light of the sun and how beautiful it is! When we reflect the Light of Christ, how beautiful we are!

I was recently at Creighton University and praying in St. John's Chapel. At the high altar there is a stature of Jesus flanked by four others: Mary, John the Apostle, John the Baptist, and King David. As I looked at the faces at first I thought there must have been a very non-imaginative sculptor involved because they all kind of looked alike. Then it dawned on me that they are all related and thus reflect a family resemblance – they all shared in the same bloodline. So do we! We partake of the Chalice of the Lord and share in His bloodline too. Do we look like we are related to Jesus? Are we a reflection of His Love, Mercy, and Goodness? This is our daily examination of consciousness – am I conscious of who I am and ever more who I should be becoming.

Now, one last story to round out the title of this talk: The Witch, the Watch and the Wallet. Some years ago my dear father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer in what could have been

considered the prime of his career. He was always a very faith-filled man, a devout Catholic, a loving husband and father, but a “type A” driven workaholic (as they say, the apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree). When he was diagnosed and was very aware of the outcome, he looked at me and said, “David, take these from me” as he took off his watch and pulled out his wallet, and continued, “I have lived my life by my watch and my wallet; money and time have ruled me, and now they mean nothing.”

My father literally spent the next four months preparing for the Father and never looked back. He reflected upon this with me some weeks before he died that he wished he had learned this lesson earlier and wanted me to learn from his mistake; mind you, it is *the* classical “Type A” mistake! And so the question to each of us is, what can *we* do now to become the man, the Christian, the priest that God wants us to be? To be the best that we can for our families, this community, and for our Church?

Reflecting on how blessed we are in our vocations and the need to be mindful of the dangers of worldliness, Pope Francis extemporaneously addressed the priests, religious and seminarians in Havana last month with the following words:

St. Ignatius [...] said that poverty was the wall and the mother of consecrated life. It is the mother because it gives life to a greater confidence in God. And it is the wall because it protects from all worldliness. How many destroyed souls there are, generous souls like that of the sad young man, who began well, and then gradually they became attached to the love of this rich worldliness and they ended badly. That is, mediocre. They ended up without love because riches make us paupers. But they make us paupers in a bad way. They take away the best that we have and make us poor in the only richness that is worthwhile, so as to put our securities in the other one.

The spirit of poverty, the spirit of detachment, the spirit of leaving everything to follow Jesus. This leaving everything is not something I made up. It’s found various times in the Gospel. In the call of the first ones, who left their boat, their nets and followed him. Those who left everything to follow Jesus (Celebration of Vespers with Priests, Men and Women Religious and Seminarians at the Cathedral of Havana, 20 September 2015).

Daily reflection on gratitude and on our need for detachment keeps us falling into the trap of mediocrity as priests and seminarians.

Tonight, I have shared some simple ways as to how we can reflect on the virtues that we are called to embrace, to reflect Christ to all those we meet, to be more aware of not allowing time and money to rule our lives, but rather allow people and faith to remain at the center. One of my mantras is “people over projects” which is hard to keep in mind when there is always so much “to do.” A daily examination and reflection on our actions and attitudes as I have described *will* keep us on the path to life, life to the full as Jesus speaks of in John 10:10 (to go deeper read the *Examen Prayer* by Fr. Timothy Gallagher - a great read). The singular grace of my 30 day Ignatian retreat at the IPF ten years ago was the deepening understanding that I am not ultimately in charge (and am still learning!). The sooner in life that we can grow in self-understanding and learn this important lesson of smashing the idols every age, namely time and money/possessions, the happier we will be - not to mention we will have a happier community, parish, office, and rectory. Obviously we still work hard and do our part to be good providers and pastors of our parishes, but not with unreflective lives! Our lives are meant for greater meaning and purpose and certainly greater freedom and joy. My Dad never did put his watch back on nor use his wallet again, and he died a rich man!

Back to our Broadway musical – it wasn't until the main character realized she was "Limited" that she triumphed. We are the same, apart from God we can do nothing (cf. John 15:5). We must remain deeply connected to Christ Jesus and be reminded of our identity as children of God through living a life of reflection. A daily examination allows us to remain in his love as John chapter 15 so wonderfully reminds us about our need to stay connected:

Remain in me, as I remain in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. [...] If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete (John 15:4-5, 10-11).

"The Witch, the Watch and the Wallet" – not quite as profound as C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, but maybe memorable enough to help you remember to reflect!
God bless you.