The Ignatian *Examen*

A Paradigm for Setting Mission Priorities at AJCU Schools

Why an Examen?

The **Examination of Consciousness** ("Examen") is a practice of spiritual self-reflection described by St. Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises*. Steeped in self-knowledge and attuned to the invitations of God in daily life, the Examen helps us to make choices that are rooted in who we are and who we are called to become. By framing the Mission Priority Examen in this way, the Society of Jesus and AJCU are affirming a process that is institutionally reflective, sensitive to the distinctive circumstances and potential of each school and undertaken for the purpose of mission.

While some elements of the MPE’s Self-study process may appear similar to the various accreditation processes in which Jesuit schools participate (e.g., a report is written, small peer review team visits the school and meets with a variety of groups, etc.), the spirit of the MPE is quite different and rooted firmly in the Ignatian tradition. The MPE is cast as a **collaborative** experience:

- among students, faculty, and staff in the college/university community;
- with other Jesuit institutions who offer colleagues as Peer Visitors; and
- with the Jesuit Province, who sponsors the MPE, and the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities, who facilitates it.

The MPE provides the structure and opportunity for deep reflection on how each school distinctively expresses its Jesuit, Catholic mission, and how it will set Jesuit Mission Priorities for the future.

The Examen for Individuals

For an individual, the Examen provides an opportunity to consider the events of the day and note one’s interior movements of “consolation and desolation,” thus growing in an awareness of God’s invitational presence. Over time, these daily snapshots of our spiritual selves reveal essential
trends and directions in our lives. They clarify the arc of our relationships and the many choices that have led us toward or away from a free and generous life. Just as putting thousands of tiny, still frames of film together creates a “moving picture” that tells a story, regularly practicing the Examen helps us put the still shots of each day, week, and month together to see with greater clarity where we are in the narrative of our life, and where God is calling us to be.

The structure of the Ignatian Examen is designed to aid us in this daily reflection. St. Ignatius suggests some simple steps, which may be summarized as:

❖ Becoming gratefully aware of God’s presence and gifts
❖ Reviewing the events of our day and noticing our spiritual and emotional responses;
❖ Selecting one or two experiences from the day that “stick” in our consciousness, and asking for insight on them;
❖ Taking responsibility for our failings and asking God for help and support;
❖ Envisioning how we might live in a renewed way tomorrow, cognizant of God’s transforming love; and
❖ Closing in prayer and thanksgiving.

What sets the Examen apart from other reflective spiritual practices? Do not most people already acknowledge the wisdom of the maxim attributed to Socrates, “The unexamined life is not worth living?” Many of us pray or reflect for our own spiritual growth, but the Ignatian Examen goes a step further. **The purpose of the Examen is to help us grow in spiritual readiness for mission.** Because God’s love flows in an outward direction – continually healing, renewing, creating, and restoring – we, too, are called to love in an active, encompassing way. The personal self-reflection that the Examen entails has spiritual and practical consequences for us, but also for others.

Several helpful print and electronic resources explore the practice of the Ignatian Examen for individuals, including:

- **The Daily Examen** (Loyola Press)
- **The Daily Examen** (Society of Jesus in the U.S.)
- **Rummaging for God: Praying backward through Your Day** (Hamm)
- **A Simple, Life Changing Prayer** (Manny)
- **Reimagining the Ignatian Examen: Fresh Ways to Pray from Your Day** (Thibodeaux)
Conducting a Mission Priority Examen

It is the hope of the Society of Jesus that all AJCU schools will enter their MPEs prayerfully and with attention to the basic elements of the Examen. The dynamics of the Examen are easily adaptable for this purpose, as the following chart illustrates.

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<th>Individual Examen</th>
<th>Mission Priority Examen</th>
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<td><em>Becoming gratefully aware of God’s presence and gifts</em></td>
<td>The Self-study Committee reflects gratefully together on the school’s current Jesuit, Catholic mission commitments, the experiences of colleagues and students, and the focus areas recommended by the Provincial. Together with the President, they design an approach to the Examen process that is consistent with the school’s circumstances and culture. The Self-study Committee and President work with the Provincial Assistant for Higher Education to identify and invite a Peer Visitor Team of three to four colleagues from other AJCU schools to assist them in the Examen process.</td>
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<td><em>Reviewing the events of our day, and noticing our spiritual and emotional responses</em></td>
<td>Through a structured listening process, the Self-study Committee considers the mission reflections of students, faculty, staff, members of the Jesuit Community, alumni/ae, the local Bishop, etc. They write a brief Self-study that includes points of alignment with the mission (spiritual consolation) and areas for renewal or growth (challenge or desolation). Using the themes of <em>Characteristics of Jesuit Colleges and Universities: A Guide for Mission Reflection</em>, the Self-study Committee and President articulate two to four Jesuit Mission Priorities for the school.</td>
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| **Selecting one or two experiences from the day that “stick” in our consciousness, and asking for insight on them** | The Peer Visitor Team reads the Self-study and spends two to four days at the school, meeting with various constituencies. The Peer Team engages this work as companions in mission, who wish to see the school’s Jesuit, Catholic mission thrive and grow in every dimension of its work.

At the end of the campus visit, the Peer Team meets with the President and Self-study Committee Chair(s) to talk about the Peer Team’s impressions make initial recommendations. |
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<td><strong>Taking responsibility for our failings, and asking God for help and support</strong></td>
<td>After the campus visit, the Peer Team, Self-study Committee, and President reflect on what they have seen and heard, focusing on any needed areas for improvement in the school’s Self-study and Jesuit Mission Priorities.</td>
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<td><strong>Envisioning how we might live in a renewed way tomorrow, cognizant of God’s transforming love</strong></td>
<td>The Peer Team writes a draft report that highlights the school’s mission successes, along with selected areas for growth and improvement. The draft report is shared with the Self-study Committee and President. An iterative exchange ensues, during which the Self-study Chair and Peer Team Chair discuss possible corrections/emendations to the Self-study and/or Peer Team Report. Either document may be adapted to reflect new insights gained through the Peer Team visit.</td>
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<td><strong>Closing in prayer and thanksgiving</strong></td>
<td>At the conclusion of this dialogic process, the school submits the final Self-study, Executive Summary, and Peer Team Report to the Regional Provincial and AJCU President. They, in turn, share these documents with the other Provincials and the President of the Jesuit Conference for discussion. These Jesuit officials receive the materials prayerfully, with a deep desire for the school</td>
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to live its Jesuit, Catholic mission in the most authentic way possible.

Following the discussion among the Provincials, the Regional Provincial, AJCU President and President of the Jesuit Conference all attach letters to the school’s materials and submit the entirety to the Superior General, V. Rev. Arturo Sosa, S.J. Fr. Sosa reflects on what he has received and sends a letter to the Provincial that affirms the school’s mission priorities and Jesuit, Catholic identity and/or makes recommendations. The Provincial contacts the President to share the General’s affirmation.

The university President shares the news with the campus and sets in motion the next steps of acting on the Jesuit Mission Priorities. Acting on the priorities reflects the true completion of the Examen process.
Casting the MPE as an Examen is important for helping every school recall the larger purpose of this important project. If Jesuit colleges and universities are seeking to deepen their mission commitments, then the process itself can go a long way in communicating that desire. More detailed information on conducting the MPE is described on the Mission Priority Examen website: https://www.ajcunet.edu/missionexamen