

This belief that grace can be offered and accepted in times and places of suffering and hardship is not a result of natural optimism or 'positive thinking', or a temperamental disposition to see a silver lining in every cloud. I am thinking rather of a faith-based conviction that we live in a universe of grace; that God is present in and can be found in all things; that there are no circumstances in which, often in spite of appearances, the Spirit of God is not alive and active and inviting us to respond. It is a recognition of the everlasting generativity or creativity of God, God's power to bring new life, new possibilities for human living, even in the most unpromising circumstances.

In Eliot's 'Marina', the speaker's response to the offer of grace is acceptance and a commitment to the new life:

...let me

Resign my life for this life, my speech for
that unspoken,
The awakened, lips parted, the hope, the
new ships.

If you move in Ignatian spirituality circles you will probably be familiar with a form of regular prayer usually referred to as '[the examen](#)'. The word 'examen' is connected to '(self)-examination' and the prayer involves recalling and reflecting on particular times and places in one's life – it may be a day, [a week](#) or [longer](#). Ignatius believed that this form of prayer was especially valuable for busy people. He recognised that Jesuits were likely to be busy people and stipulated that they should make time for a daily examen as an aid to everyday discernment, even if their mission did not allow time for any other form of personal prayer. In the form in which Ignatius describes the examen in the first week of the Spiritual Exercises, where it is offered as a prayer that all Christians might practise, it is very much a traditional 'examination of conscience' based on the commandments and the 'deadly sins and their corresponding virtues'. In this form its

appeal is understandably limited in the contemporary world. In the 1960s, however, a Jesuit called George Aschenbrenner offered a new, updated approach to praying the examen and revealed its potential as a form of prayerful remembering and reflecting on God's gifts over a particular period of time with a view to informing the choices that give shape and direction to one's daily life.

In this present pandemic there is much talk in the media and all around us about life afterwards and how this will or will not be affected by the experiences we have lived through during these months: losses of friends or family members, restrictions on movement, travel and visits, enforced isolation, the dangers of infection, being confined to one place, working from home, and so forth. Looking to the future, people are talking about whether the pandemic has changed us and, if so, how? What has it shown us about the way we lived before it struck? Are we going to go back to the same or live differently? If differently, why and how and, crucially, what are we using as a guide to the new life?

Eliot's 'Marina' suggests to me that it is worth exploring the possibility that Covid-19 may be offering us the grace of a particular time and place. And in connection with that I want to outline a way in which the Ignatian examen might furnish a prayerful method of reflection to guide us into the future. Such a reflection might have the following elements.

- A general prayer of thanksgiving for gifts received, in recognition that 'all that is good and every gift descend from on high...as rays descend from the sun, and waters from a fountain' (*Spiritual Exercises* §237).
- A prayer to the Holy Spirit for enlightenment and guidance in this period of reflection.
- Memory: calling to mind the gifts received in particular places and over a particular

period of time during this pandemic, with a prayer of thanksgiving.

- Reflection: how have I responded to these gifts of grace? A prayer of sorrow if I have in any way neglected or abused them.
- Reflection: from my experience so far, can I identify a grace associated with this time of pandemic and the particular places in which I have lived?
- Reflection: how might I accept and respond to this grace in such a way that it helps to give shape and direction to life in the future?
- A prayer of thanksgiving for blessings received.

It is unlikely of course that the answers to these questions will come at once. Waiting on God in patient silence is a central element in contemplative prayer. However, repeated gently over time, the examen, I would suggest, allows an awareness of grace offered in particular times and places to emerge, albeit slowly, and enlarges and strengthens one's capacity to respond to it courageously, generously and wisely going into the future.

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