

Finding God in All Things: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of Praying the Ignatian Examen

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ABSTRACT

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As part of the clergy staff of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas, I have wondered what practices are used to help experience a deep relationship with God, especially when it is affirmed that believing in God is important. The percentage of those affirming belief in God as important is high for adults at St. Paul's and throughout the state of Texas. However, religious practices, once seen as necessary for deepening one's relationship with God, are sharply declining.

In a post-Christendom context, when religious practices have declined and belief in God is no longer assumed necessary, it is vital for faith communities to offer tools that will aid in experiencing a life-giving relationship with God. The act of ministry at the center of this thesis project is a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative inquiry of the lived experience of St. Paul's parishioners praying the Ignatian Examen during Lent 2019.

Using a hermeneutic phenomenological method in a qualitative inquiry means arriving at the essence of the experience of participants. As the researcher, I am also involved in this study. I have my own experience of praying the Examen and being shaped by Ignatian Spirituality. I believe the Ignatian Examen could help one experience a deeper relationship with God. Part of hermeneutic phenomenology is to name my presuppositions and suspend them, as much as possible, in order to hear the experience of participants.

The act of ministry culminates in a composite description of the lived experience of St. Paul's parishioners praying the Ignatian Examen. The final chapter reflects upon lessons learned and future possibilities of how practicing the Ignatian Examen might have a positive affect upon experiencing a relationship with God in a post-Christendom context.

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This thesis project signifies the completion of a process that began in fall 2015: a Doctor of Ministry degree at Virginia Theological Seminary. Yet, in a very real way, it is the launching of a life-long project of learning. Finding God in all things has and continues to offer me innumerable opportunities to experience God's grace and to give thanks.

I give thanks for the congregations of St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Bellville, Texas, and St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas. God's sustaining grace in the lives of parishioners is a gift I will always cherish.

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James Melvin Pevehouse, Feast of the Baptism of our Lord, 2020

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

What is the Problem?

I joined the clergy staff of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas (St. Paul's) as Senior Associate Rector on August 1, 2018, after serving for nearly five years as rector of St. Mary's Episcopal Church, Bellville, Texas. Though not a native of Texas, I have lived in this state since 2000. During my time in Texas, I have lived in the following areas and/or cities: East Texas, the Dallas/Fort Worth Metroplex, Austin, Bellville (an hour from Houston), and now Waco (central Texas). My experiences in Texas have given me some understanding about this state that I would not have otherwise. Beyond the nineteen years in Texas, I have lived in California and Oklahoma, with the result of being able to experience life in small rural towns and large major cities.

My childhood was centered upon faith and the importance of living out that faith. Practices affirmed as necessary for living out one's faith were church attendance, bible study, prayer, and giving. The Christian faith I inherited also firmly upheld that a relationship with God was not only possible but also necessary, life-giving, and sustaining. My great-grandfather, father, uncle, and older brother were ministers. Though it was a shock when I became an Episcopalian, it was no surprise to my family when I too, became a minister. In my own ordained ministry, I have tried to show by example that a relationship with God is life-giving. Believing that one is absolutely and unconditionally loved by God can sustain a person through life's darkest moments and accompany them during its brightest days. Making witness to this belief about God is central to how I live my life and serve as a priest.

As a priest, I am deeply interested in the lives and faith of my parishioners. I believe worshipping with a community of faith is necessary to deepen a relationship with God. Prayer is a practice that provides another opportunity to experience a relationship with God.¹ However, I have often struggled with sustaining a long-term prayer practice. Though I have always felt that prayer is necessary, it is a practice that has not always been easy. Because of my own history with prayer, I have often wondered if some of my parishioners have shared similar struggles.

Listening well is a fundamental way for me to live out my vocation as a priest. Richard Osmer, in his book, *Practical Theology*, writes about a continuum of attending. At one end is what he calls, “informal attending.” Much of the ongoing listening and attending in pastoral work is informal. Describing informal attending, Osmer writes:

...informal attending has to do with the quality of attending in everyday life. It includes active listening and attentiveness in interpersonal communication. It also includes our openness to the beauty and tragedy we encounter day by day. It is pausing to notice the beauty of nature as it gives witness to the glory of God. It is attending to a young Latino man riding by on a bicycle and pausing to wonder about the long journey that has brought him to this place and his quiet heroism in working so hard to send money back home. It is opening ourselves to the pain of those we encounter in the back story of the newspaper or sitting across from us in our office. Attending in these kinds of informal ways does not come naturally or easily. An orientation of openness, attentiveness, and prayerfulness is nurtured by our participation in spiritual practices that help us attend to others within the presence of God.²

I often wonder how parishioners experience their relationship with God. As my ministry at St. Paul’s Episcopal Church began and I got to know more parishioners, I

¹ Prayer is one possible faith practice, along with Communal Worship, Bible Study, Christian Education, etc. Because I understand prayer as a practice, I will use these words interchangeably throughout this thesis, i.e. Praying the Ignatian Examen and Practicing the Ignatian Examen.

² Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 37, 38.

further wondered if praying the Ignatian Examen might help in experiencing a deeper relationship with God.

Before looking in depth at the act of ministry that is at the heart of the project, some background information of my place of ministry will be helpful. St. Paul's is located in downtown Waco, Texas. Waco is located in Central Texas, about ninety miles south of Dallas/Fort Worth and ninety miles north of Austin. The state of Texas is in the southern United States. St. Paul's is part of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas (EDOT). The state of Texas is covered by five complete dioceses and parts of a sixth.³ In 2018, the city of Waco had a population of 138,183 people.⁴ Waco has three Episcopal churches: St. Paul's, St. Alban's, and Holy Spirit. St. Paul's is the oldest of the three and occupies a downtown location in this historic city. Historically, it has always been the largest of the three in terms of Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) and membership. St. Paul's was founded in 1863 and began its relationship with the city of Waco. It was in 1878 that the land was purchased where the present church still stands. The parish's relationship with the Diocese of Texas can be seen as it served as host for diocesan council in 1890 and again in 1913. This kind of relationship still exists today.

Parish historical records reveal examples of how the faith of St. Paul's parishioners has affected the community of Waco. One such document states, "St. Paul's has long had a tradition of being active on behalf of those in need in the community, and in 1920 the parish erected what was known as St. Paul's House, which provided a nursery

³ The Episcopal dioceses located in the state of Texas are: Texas, West Texas, Dallas, Fort Worth, Northwest Texas, and part of the diocese of Rio Grande.

⁴ <http://www.worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities/waco-population>. According to the United States Census Bureau, the Waco Metropolitan Statistical Area (including McLennan and Falls counties) had a 2018 estimated population of 271, 942.

for the children of the mill workers, a night school, a library, a clinic, home nursing, and distributed food and clothing to the mill workers and others in need.”⁵ This brief example reflects an understanding of faith that must be shared. One’s relationship with God was deepened and expressed by actively serving those in the community.

As I will show in the next chapter, membership and church attendance places St. Paul’s among the largest churches in the Diocese of Texas. Not unlike other churches, attendance has been a central practice understood as necessary to foster and reveal a relationship with God. There was a strong societal impulse to belong to and participate in a faith community, not only in Waco but also throughout the United States. This would be part of living in the period known as Christendom—being an upstanding citizen was almost synonymous with being a church member and attender. This key religious practice no longer seems to hold the unchallenged priority for many.

Interestingly, though regular communal worship has declined, Pew Research Center’s statistics state nearly eighty percent of those living in Texas still identify as some type of Christian⁶ and eighty-eight percent of those surveyed said they were absolutely or fairly certain of their belief in God.⁷ Pew Research also shows that while eighty-six percent of the population believe religion is either very or somewhat important, those attending a religious service at least once a week stand at forty-two percent, those attending once or twice a month/a few times a year at thirty-three percent, and those who said seldom/never at twenty-five percent.⁸ These numbers seem to

⁵ History of St. Paul’s Episcopal Church (Waco, TX, n.d.).

⁶Pew Research Center, “*Religious Landscape Study*.” Assessed November 27, 2018.f <http://www.perforum.org/religious-landscape-study/state/texas/#beliefs-and-practices>, 1.

⁷ Pew Research, “Study,” 3.

⁸ Pew Research, “Study,” 4, 5.

indicate that a strong belief in God does not necessarily equate to a high level of religious participation.

I fear, too often, much energy has been spent trying to recapture the same numbers and spirit of Christendom. Describing some aspects of life in Christendom, author Tod Bolsinger writes:

Sociologists and theologians refer to this recently passed period as Christendom, the seventeen-hundred-year-long era with Christianity as the privileged center of Western cultural life. Christendom gave us “blue laws” and the Ten Commandments in school. It gave us “under God” in the pledge of allegiance and exhortations to Bible reading in the national newspapers.⁹

If regular participation, at least in Christendom, was key for fostering a deeper relationship with God, what other practices in post-Christendom might aid in that experience of relationship? To try and answer that question, I have asked parishioners to try a specific spiritual practice. This paper explores asking parishioners to engage in a particular prayer practice and then learning what their experience was of that practice.

The Act of Ministry and Thesis Question

The specific act of ministry at the core of this thesis project was asking a group of parishioners to practice the Ignatian Examen in Lent 2019. The Examen is built around reflecting and then asking and answering two basic questions: Where did I see God today? Where did I not see God today?¹⁰ The instructions given to participants at St. Paul’s are as follows:

⁹ Tod Bolsinger, *Canoeing the Mountains: Christian Leadership in Uncharted Territory* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 11.

¹⁰ As Chapter Three will show, the Examen can be understood and practiced with great flexibility, but these two questions reveal the basic impulse in this discipline.

- Set a timer for no more than 15 minutes (the Examen is intended to be a short, focused prayer).
 - Begin and end with a familiar pattern or ritual (i.e. breathe in and out four to five times or make the sign of the cross or say the Lord's Prayer)
1. Ask for God's grace to reflect honestly on your day.
 2. Replay the day—Where did I encounter God today? What gave me joy today? Give thanks for all those moments—regardless of being big or small.
 3. Replay the day—Where did God seem absent? How did I fall short, or, When was there a lack of joy?
 4. Repent of any mistakes or failures.
 5. If so moved, make 1 to 2 concrete resolutions for the next day.

My relationship with the Ignatian Examen began almost two years ago when I started practicing it myself. As I shared earlier, regular and consistent prayer has never been easy for me. Part of the impulse of beginning this practice was a desire to adopt something that could help deepen and enliven my own relationship with God. I have practiced the Examen every day for almost two years, and it has become an embedded part of my daily routine. It is a prayer practice helping me to experience God in life by being aware of what is happening around me as I move through my day. The Examen is intended to be a compact time of reflection that can take place anywhere. It is a very portable practice that one can use in a car, in a cathedral or alongside a rolling river. As with other spiritual practices, the Examen may not be a helpful tool for all. The intention, though, was not to offer a practice that would work for all people in all places but rather one that would be a useful tool for some.

Arriving at St. Paul's in summer 2018, I knew there was pastoral work to accomplish so that parishioners might trust me and participate in this project. During fall 2018, I established relationships of trust throughout the parish, all the while continuing my own prayer practice and reflecting upon whether there was any interest at St. Paul's.

Throughout the fall, I could see there was interest, so I set about seeking participants. I was not focused on a specific category of parishioners. My interest was on whoever would volunteer. By January 2019, I had eleven who were interested and wound up with nine who finished the act of ministry and provided the data¹¹ needed for this project.¹²

Since this practice has been so helpful to me, I believed it could be helpful for participants. As I began to experience God in a more tangible way, I felt others might as well. Central to my praying the Examen was the presence of joy as I reflected upon my day. Because the sense of joy has been so strong for me, I also felt participants would experience deep joy in their own practice. I wanted to share this with others and determine whether it might have a similar impact for them.

This thesis project is built around attempting to answer this thesis question: What is the lived experience of St. Paul's parishioners practicing the Ignatian Examen? Every part of this paper is intended to be in service of answering this question. A brief reflection upon methodology will help make clear the "process" employed in answering the thesis question.

Research Methodology

Hermeneutic phenomenology is the methodology employed in this thesis. John Creswell describes what is involved in a phenomenological study by saying, "A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their

¹¹ "Data" as used in the thesis refers to the field texts gathered in the Act of Ministry. These field texts are comprised of Lived Experience Descriptions written by each participant and a manuscript from a final interview with each participant.

¹² A more in-depth description of the act of ministry will follow in Chapter Four.

lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon.”¹³ Explaining further, he writes, “The basic purpose of phenomenology is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence.”¹⁴ Max van Manen, a key figure in phenomenological studies, writes:

Phenomenology aims at gaining a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences...phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of an effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world.¹⁵

Hermeneutic phenomenology is an exhaustive process, because an attempt is made to “get at” the essence of the phenomenon being explored or examined. When exploring a phenomenon in a qualitative inquiry, this, “getting at the essence” is mediated through the voice of participants.

Curiosity and wonderment are crucial in phenomenology. The desire is to ask questions in an attempt to learn. Mark Vagle explains:

Much like their conception of phenomena, phenomenologists use the word *intentionality* to mean the inseparable connectedness between subjects (that is, human beings) and objects (that is, all other things, animate and inanimate, and ideas) in the world...The use of intentionality here does not mean what we choose or plan. It is not used to signify any action we might want to take. It is used to signify how we are meaningfully connected to the world.¹⁶

Phenomenology also forces the researcher to pause, often for great lengths of time, to reflect. It is focused reflection that requires sitting with the field notes or research

¹³ John W. Creswell and Cheryl N. Proth, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, Fourth Edition (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2018), 75.

¹⁴ Creswell and Proth, *Qualitative*, 75.

¹⁵ Max van Manen, *Researching Lived Experience: Human Science for an Action Sensitive Pedagogy*, Second Edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 9.

¹⁶ Mark D. Vagle, *Crafting Phenomenological Research* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 27.

data and reflecting upon them. van Manen writes, “phenomenological reflection is not *introspective* but *retrospective*. Reflection on lived experience is always retrospective; it is reflection on experience that is already passed or lived through.”¹⁷

Arriving at the lived experience of participants practicing the Ignatian Examen is at the heart of this phenomenological inquiry. However, in qualitative studies such as this one, the exact process of how one arrives at describing the experience of participants varies amongst practitioners. Lynn Butler-Kisber and John Creswell have been helpful in describing something of a process in phenomenology.¹⁸ Butler-Kisber, encouraging caution, writes:

Analysis never just begins when the research material has been gathered together. Rather it is an ongoing, recursive process that starts well before a project is underway and certainly continues long after the work has been ‘completed.’ Nor are these guidelines suggested as a recipe for phenomenological analysis, but rather as a useful starting point...¹⁹

Creswell was most helpful in thinking through a process to be employed. The following steps show the process I followed in this phenomenological analysis, which is greatly influenced by Creswell²⁰ and the process used by Peter John Hobbs in his own thesis,²¹

- Read and reread the field texts on multiple occasions.
- Pull out significant statements from the field texts.
- Arrange the significant statements into smaller groups (called Meaning Units) and describe those units with one to two words.
- Write 2-4 textual descriptions for each of the groups of meaning (what was experienced).

¹⁷ van Manen, *Researching*, 10.

¹⁸ Lynn Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Informed Perspectives* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2010), 53.

¹⁹ Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 53.

²⁰ Creswell and Proth, *Qualitative*, 201.

²¹ Peter John Hobbs, “*Bringing it Home: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of Teenagers Doing Lectio Divinia with their Parents*” (Doctor of Ministry Thesis, Virginia Theological Seminary, 2013), 121.

- Write 2-4 structural descriptions (how the experience happened).
- Write a composite description of the phenomenon.

It is important to remember that phenomenologists push back against a strict, linear process. Speaking about the process employed in his own thesis project, Peter John Hobbs explains:

It is important to emphasize...at the beginning of the section that this process is non-linear and that the steps taken cannot be isolated, despite the listed offering above. There is fluidity to hermeneutic phenomenology analysis such that the researcher moves within the various steps in a process of reflection, reading, writing, re-reading, and re-writing.²²

In phenomenology, much is written concerning the concept of bracketing.

However, it is not always clear what is meant by bracketing—What does it mean? What does it look like? How realistic is it? Before proceeding, it is necessary to describe my understanding of bracketing and how I will practice it throughout this thesis.

A Word about Bracketing

Hermeneutic Phenomenology involves interpretation. The researcher, with a level of participation in the phenomenological process, desires to arrive at describing the lived experience of participants. The researcher is involved with participants and writing the description. These activities involve a level of interpretation. In an attempt to write a lived experience description, the researcher must engage the work of bracketing and have some clarity concerning this activity.

²² Hobbs, “Bringing,” 121.

Creswell describes the traditional role of “bracketing” as follows: “investigators set aside their experiences, as much as possible, to take a fresh perspective toward the phenomenon under examination.”²³ Discussion continues among scholars, given a post-modern context, as to whether it is realistic to think researchers can totally set aside their assumptions or experiences. Max van Manen writes, “How does one put out of play everything one knows about an experience that one has selected for study? If we simply try to forget or ignore what we already ‘know,’ we may find that the presuppositions persistently creep back into our reflections.”²⁴ Instead, he suggests:

It is better to make explicit our understanding, beliefs, biases, assumptions, presuppositions, and theories. We try to come to terms with our assumptions, not in order to forget them again, but rather to hold them deliberately at bay and even to turn this knowledge against itself, as it were, thereby exposing its shallow or concealing character.²⁵

van Manen does not accept that a total setting aside is possible, but there is work in self-awareness the researcher must do in phenomenology. Creswell offers a helpful definition for bracketing as “suspending our understandings in a reflective move that cultivates curiosity.”²⁶ Richard Osmer seems to have this in mind as he reflects upon the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, writing, “Rather than pretending to bracket out all preunderstandings in the futile attempt to hold a neutral, objective point of view, scholars do better to acknowledge their interpretive starting point...It was only the

²³ Creswell and Proth, *Qualitative*, 78.

²⁴ van Manen, *Researching*, 47.

²⁵ van Manen, *Researching*, 47.

²⁶ Creswell and Proth, *Qualitative*, 81.

Enlightenment's 'prejudice against prejudice' that led modern science and scholarship to deny the positive role of preunderstanding."²⁷

This discussion concerning bracketing is important, because as the researcher in this project, I have my own history of practicing the Ignatian Examen as a spiritual practice. I have found the Examen helpful in deepening my relationship with God. As a priest, I am not a disinterested bystander observing faith communities from the outside. I am concerned as I look at the number of people participating in religious services at St. Paul's as compared to as recently as thirty years ago. Bracketing, for me, involves naming where I am as researcher and writer. There is much to being an ordained minister and living amongst a specific group of people in a pastoral relationship. My own sense of spirituality is being shaped by a growing and deepening understanding of Ignatian Spirituality. Bracketing involves naming where I am at the beginning.

The next two chapters of this thesis will be an extended exercise in bracketing as I attempt to name my own understanding regarding the sociology of religion, especially in Texas, and how I understand and have found helpful Ignatian Spirituality and more specifically the Ignatian Examen. From there, I will try to suspend my own understandings as part of the hermeneutic phenomenological process in order to hear and understand the experience of the participants. Before that process begins, it will be helpful to gain a sense of the direction this thesis will take.

²⁷ Osmer, *Practical*, 22.

Chapters and Thesis Organization

Chapter Two will describe the broad sociological context for which the act of ministry takes place. This chapter will move from broad to narrow. It will begin by gaining a sense of the beginning of Christendom and its effect upon faith. After looking at the fall of Christendom, I will look at the role of religion in the United States and from there move specifically to Texas, a state in the southern United States. My contention is that there is not a single “United States” understanding of religion. After discussing the religious context in Texas, we will be in a position to discuss the more specific context of St. Paul’s, Waco.

Chapter Three will be a theological reflection beginning with a brief look at Ignatian Spirituality. This will include a biographical sketch of Ignatius of Loyola— influences in his life, how he understood faith, and the legacy he left. This is important because the Examen, as a spiritual tool, makes greater sense when seen as part of Ignatian Spirituality.

Chapter Four will contain a thorough description of the act of ministry in this project. It will describe the different steps to begin this project. Hermeneutic phenomenology will provide the lens through which the field texts are read and understood. A composite description of the lived experience of participants practicing the Ignatian Examen will complete this chapter.

Chapter Five will conclude this thesis. It will focus upon what was learned from this project. Because curiosity is necessary in phenomenological work, there will also be thoughts and possibilities imagined for further study in related areas.

Chapter Two

SOCIOLOGICAL REFLECTION

This chapter seeks to describe the sociological background in which the participants from St. Paul's find themselves. The sociological description will also help reveal why I believe the Ignatian Examen could be a helpful discipline. If cultural contexts have changed and continue to do so, then thinking about how a relationship with God is experienced needs to be reflected upon.

To help understand how the Ignatian Examen could be a helpful discipline, the sociological description in this chapter will begin with a look at what is meant by the term, "secular." Living and ministering in a secular context requires a different kind of thinking about how one thinks and talks about a relationship with God than what may have existed in Christendom. It will be helpful to gain some basic understanding of Christian history broadly, and then move more specifically through the role of religion in the United States, the state of Texas, the Episcopal Church in Texas, and finally St. Paul's, Waco. By gaining a sociological perspective, I will show later in chapter three how the Ignatian Examen could be a helpful tool given the sociological context of St. Paul's, Waco.

Secular: What Does it Mean?

As secularism has risen, belief in God and the practice of faith has changed. Before looking at belief and practice, it is helpful to understand what is meant by the term secular and how it affects the different contexts in the United States, especially Waco, Texas.

In the introduction to his book *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor writes that it is not always clear what is meant by the term secular. He offers three possible definitions for secular. The first states, “secularity concentrates on the common institutions and practices—most obviously, but not only the state...though all pre-modern societies were in some way connected to, based on, guaranteed by some faith in, or adherence to God, or some notion of ultimate reality, the modern Western state is free from this connection.” The second states, “secularity consists in the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to church.” The third states, “secularity focuses on the conditions of belief. The shift in secularity in this sense consists, among other things, of a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace.”¹

Encouraging the practice of the Ignatian Examen might assume one even desires a relationship with God or understands it as necessary. My contention, though, is that the context in which St. Paul’s is located—central Texas, southern United States, the Bible Belt—fits more in Taylor’s second definition: a falling off of religious belief and practice.

Taylor further writes, “One way to put the question...is this: why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many find this not only easy, but even inescapable?”² Something has happened in the 500

¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007), 1-3.

² Taylor, *Secular*, 25.

years in Taylor's question. The collapse of Christendom shows a society in which belief in God is no longer unchallenged or assumed.

Some brief background on the history of Christendom will help provide the historic context needed to gain clarity about some of the major sociological changes in the last five centuries and how those changes have affected the United States, Texas, Waco, and St. Paul's.

Christendom's Beginnings

The history of the earliest followers of Jesus is quite different than what has existed throughout history and especially the contexts that have existed in the United States. Concerning the beginning of Christianity, James Davison Hunter writes:

The Christian Church had its origins as a small sect within Judaism at the periphery of the Roman Empire. For a century after the death of Christ, Christianity was little more than a superstition promulgated by a 'club' that was only threatening insofar as any association provided an opportunity for social/religious and political unrest to develop.³

Hunter further writes, "The church lacked financial, intellectual, and cultural resources, it had few defenders among elite classes, and its relationship to the Roman Empire had not been fully articulated."⁴ In the first three centuries after Jesus' resurrection and ascension, led by the work of Christian intellectuals, such as Justin Martyr, Clement, Origen, and Tertullian (to name a few), intellectually, at least, things began changing for the church. Hunter writes, "By the time Origen died in 253, Christianity was no longer merely self-protective...needless to say, the disputes over

³ James Davison Hunter, *To Change The World: The Irony, Tragedy, & Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2010), 49.

⁴ Hunter, *To Change*, 49.

Christianity didn't end in the third century, but the terms of engagement had changed. Critics could no longer dismiss it; they recognized that Christianity was here to stay.”⁵

As seen in Hunter's writing, the Christian church had to learn how to adapt to changing contexts. The challenges the Christian church faced at the beginning were certainly different than those arising after the third century. Historical perspective, though, can remind us that the Christian church has seemingly always needed to practice flexibility and adaptability.

Political events around this time also had a tremendous impact upon Christians during these early centuries. Proclaimed during the reign of Constantine I, the Edict of Milan in 313 CE declared official tolerance for Christians. This changed the kind of external pressure Christians had been facing. Constantine would also call the First Council of Nicaea in 325 CE, at which a Creed of Christian belief was written. Taken together, all these events and circumstances—both internally and externally—helped change the historical context for the Christian church from the first three centuries after Jesus throughout the next seventeen centuries, leading into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The Fall of Christendom (at least in the United States)

The practice of faith in the United States, I believe, has been aided for many years by a strong societal impulse for community. Strengths of communal life were certainly felt in church but also throughout other parts of society. Describing the “collapse” of American community in the twentieth century, Professor Robert Putnam writes:

⁵ Hunter, *To Change*, 53.

During the first two-thirds of the century Americans took a more and more active role in the social and political life of their communities—in churches and union halls, in bowling alleys and clubrooms, around committee tables and card tables and dinner tables...then, mysteriously and more or less simultaneously, we began to do all these things less often.⁶

Putnam is not writing specifically about the fall of Christendom, but he points to a change of tremendous significance in U.S. American culture. A change in connection began to be felt. Something began to change, so much so that what had always seemed to be, was no longer the case. In a lengthier quote, Putnam states what he believes has happened:

We are still more civically engaged than citizens in many other countries, but compared with our own recent past, we are less connected. We remain interested and critical spectators of the public scene. We kibitz, but we don't play. We maintain a façade of formal affiliation, but we rarely show up. We have invented new ways of expressing our demands that demand less of us. We are less likely to turn out for collective deliberation—whether in the voting booth or the meeting hall—and when we do, we find that discouragingly few of our friends and neighbors have shown up. We are less generous with our money and (with the important exception of senior citizens) with our time, and we are less likely to give strangers the benefit of the doubt. They, of course, return the favor.⁷

Again, while Putnam is describing culture in a large sense, it is the cultural context in which American Christianity finds itself. Social connection, it seems, has been breaking down throughout different contexts in the United States.

Feeling this loss, even if it cannot quite be described what has been lost, may be close to what is described in the concept of social capital. Robert Putnam, Lewis Feldstein and Don Cohen write about social capital:

As used by social scientists, social capital refers to social networks, norms of reciprocity, mutual assistance, and trustworthiness. The central insight of this approach is that social networks have real value both for the people in those

⁶ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2000), 183.

⁷ Putnam, *Bowling*, 183.

networks—hence, networking as a career strategy, for example—as well as for bystanders. Criminologists, for instance, have shown that the crime rate in a neighborhood is lowered when neighbors know one another well, benefiting even residents who are not themselves involved in neighborhood activities.⁸

The larger cultural and more specific religious changes in the United States can also appear to have happened without an observer being able to point to an isolated event or specific situation. Yet, the effects of that change are real nonetheless. It seems the years immediately after World War II, at least in the United States, reveal an understanding and practice of faith that would affect, positively and negatively, the years following. About life in the years immediately after World War II, Putnam writes further:

Postwar affluence, social mobility, and the onset of the Cold War and its attendant nuclear standoff encouraged a paradoxical mixture of optimism and anxiety and a renewed appreciation for traditional values, including both patriotism and religion. Most important, the returning veterans and their wives began producing what would soon be called the baby boom. Then, as now, getting married, settling down, and raising children were associated with more regular churchgoing.⁹

The twentieth century in the United States, as Putnam describes, was not a century in which religious belief and practice remained static. Civic activity and religious participation increased in the years immediately after World War II. Someone born in the United States during the late 1940s to the early 1960s might have a world-view in which it seems “everyone” believed in God and went to church. Even if the data does not support a constant and continual upward movement throughout the century, one might, it seems, think those twenty years are representative of the entire century and of how the entire nation functioned.

⁸ Robert D. Putnam, Lewis M. Feldstein, and Don Cohen, *Better Together: Restoring the American Community* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2003), 2.

⁹ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 2010), 83.

It also seems to be the case that during the 1940s to 1960s there was an upsurge in what could be described as “civic religion” in the United States. A dominant narrative was that if one was to be thought of as a good or upstanding citizen, that person would espouse religion and belong to a religious community (usually a Protestant Christian one). Citing Ahlstrom’s work on American religious history, Putnam explains, “Religion represented patriotism, a central unifying theme of national purpose. Being a church member and speaking favorably of religion became a means of affirming the ‘American way of life’ ... Given the temper of the electorate, it is more likely that even impious congressmen found it expedient to vote for God.”¹⁰

As Putnam describes an increase of “civic religion” in the United States in the years after World War II, one might wonder what, if any difference, there was in the experience of civic religion and the experience of a deep sense of relationship with God and other religiously like-minded people. In the years since this period, the role of religion in the United States has changed, and it is important to gain a sense of what the context looks like today. We will now briefly reflect upon the role of religion in the broader United States.

The Role of Religion in the United States

One major challenge in understanding the broader religious contexts in the United States is that of definitions. What is meant by religious or spiritual or both? Sociologist Nancy Ammerman writes:

At a time when talking about “religion” can be considered contentious, talk about spirituality can be heard from sources as diverse as Oprah Winfrey and Madonna.

¹⁰ Putnam, *American*, 88.

Spirituality talk has certainly entered the national vocabulary, but attempts at definition are often greeted with the assertion that spirituality means something different to each person. It is an intensely personal experience, we are told, something that is beyond the reach of prodding scientists or potentially constraining institutions and traditions.”¹¹

There are certainly challenges when speaking about “religious” and “spiritual.” One challenge could be the lack of clarity between the two, even inside religious groups. Some Christian traditions seem to describe a very personal relationship with God, while other Christian traditions describe a relationship that can hardly be understood apart from a practicing community. Even while the cultural context of Waco outwardly appears to be sympathetic to Christian belief, the difference is not always clear between personal spiritual belief and religious practice.

Citing the Faith Matters survey of 2006, Robert Putnam offers a glimpse into the religious traditions in the United States.¹² Almost thirty percent of the population in the United States identified as Evangelical Protestant. Nearly twenty-five percent identified as Catholic. In the two categories, Mainline Protestant and Black Protestant, both combined for almost twenty-three percent. Of note is the third largest category, behind Evangelical Protestant and Catholic, are those listed as “none.” Defining the category “nones,” Putnam writes, “When asked to identify with a religion, they indicate that they are nothing in particular. These nones are not necessarily hard-core secularists.”¹³

While there has certainly been a consistent decrease across denominational lines, the most consistent increase is among those defining themselves as none. Even as the “nones” increase, the importance of religion in the United States remains fairly high

¹¹ Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 23.

¹² Putnam, *American*, 17.

¹³ Putnam, *American*, 16.

though declining. In 2014, seventy-seven percent of adults said religion was either very or somewhat important.¹⁴ In 2007, seventy-one percent of adults said they were absolutely certain God existed. By 2014, that number had decreased to sixty-three percent.¹⁵ These numbers would seem to reveal that the role of religion and belief in God is decreasing.

A helpful term in describing religious contexts in the United States is pluralism. In her introduction to the book *Everyday Religion*, editor Nancy Ammerman writes, “Paying attention to everyday experience quickly explodes any assumption that religion is always (or ever) one thing, either for individuals or for groups...Religion today is plural (and may always have been).”¹⁶ The religious landscape in the United States is a pluralistic one. Ammerman writes, “pluralism of religious institutions has been part of the American situation from the beginning...If the United States was religiously plural in its beginnings, it has become even more so since.”¹⁷

Another aspect of the religious landscape in the United States is the role of choice. If the religious culture is a pluralistic one, then the idea of “ability” and “freedom” to choose is part of the cultural make-up. Speaking for herself and the other contributors to the book, Ammerman writes, “None of us disputes either the reality of pluralism or the way it alters the nature of religious institutional authority. What we do

¹⁴ Pew Research Center, “*Religious Landscape Study*.” Assessed July 30, 2019. <http://www.perforum.org/religious-landscape-study/importance-of-religion-in-ones-life>. 1.

¹⁵ Pew Research Center, “*Religious Landscape Study*.” Assessed July 30, 2019. <http://www.perforum.org/religious-landscape-study/belief-in-god>. 1.

¹⁶ Nancy T. Ammerman, “Introduction,” in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), 6.

¹⁷ Ammerman, “Everyday,” 7.

dispute is the notion that this necessarily constitutes a fundamental loss of religious presence or power.”¹⁸

Professor Rodney Stark, in the book *What Americans Really Believe*, writes about choice in the United States and how that affects religious life. Citing the book *The Churching of America 1776-1990*, of which he is coauthor, Stark states that in 1776, seventeen percent of Americans belonged to a local congregation but by 2005, that percentage had risen to sixty-nine percent. Reflecting upon this dramatic increase, he writes:

What a remarkable change. Church membership has risen from about 17 percent to almost 70 percent. How did this happen? Why has American church membership risen for more than two hundred years? In a word, denominationalism. Or more specifically, the need to compete with other groups for members in order to sustain themselves generates energetic churches that collectively maximize the religious recruitment of a population.¹⁹

One might wonder if this dynamic of choice is so embedded into the fabric of the United States that one could hardly, if at all, look at any aspect of life in the United States and not feel the impact of choice, or the belief that one can choose.

Plurality and choice have had a tremendous impact upon the religious landscape in the United States. The democratic impulse to be able to choose and have a sense of control over one’s destiny can be felt throughout all regions of the country. Pluralism and choice are not inherently bad. They are, however, a reality in the United States. There are many different contexts and cultures in the United States and in Texas. The dynamics of

¹⁸ Ammerman, “Everyday,” 7.

¹⁹ Rodney Stark, et al., eds. *What Americans Really Believe*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press), 12-13.

plurality and choice are experienced differently across contexts. We will now continue by looking at the role of religion inside the state of Texas.

The Role of Religion in Texas

It has been my experience, after living in Texas for nineteen years, to often hear the state referred to as the “buckle of the Bible Belt.” Other places throughout the southern United States might debate as to the center of the descriptive location. However, what has not been debated is the belief that Texas is indeed part of the country known as the Bible Belt. Another aspect of life in Texas is the size and population of the state. The continual influx of population affects many parts of life in Texas, religion included. In 1980, the population of Texas was 14,229,191. Twenty years later, in 2000, the population had grown to 20,851,820. Twenty years after that, in 2020 the population is projected to be 29,472,295.²⁰ Of the top twenty-five U.S. cities by population, six are located in Texas.²¹ These numbers reveal a state that continues to grow, with each of these major cities showing an increase.

As stated in the introduction, according to Pew Research, seventy-seven percent of adults in Texas identify as Christian. Religion in Texas is overwhelmingly identified as Christian, though there are other categories of note: non-Christian faiths (Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu, and Other Faiths) comprise four percent of the population. The category Unaffiliated (Atheist, Agnostic, and Nothing in Particular) makes up eighteen percent of the population, with “nothing in particular” coming in at thirteen percent.²²

²⁰ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/states/texas-population>.

²¹ Houston, San Antonio, Dallas, Austin, Fort Worth, and El Paso. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/us-cities>.

²² Pew Research, *Religious landscape Study Texas*, 2.

When answering about belief in God, eighty-eight percent of the adult population in Texas said they were absolutely or fairly certain of that belief.²³ Asked about the importance of religion, sixty-three percent of those in Texas replied it was very important. Twenty-three said religion was somewhat important.²⁴

Though belief in God and the role of religion in one's life remains high, it becomes less clear as to how those beliefs are lived out in one's life. Actively living out faith through specific practices is not the same as simply affirming a belief in God. As stated previously, sixty-nine percent of Texans say they believe in God, yet only forty-two percent say they attend a religious service once a week and thirty-three percent say they attend once or twice a month or a few times a year. Close behind the thirty-three percent who say once or twice a month is twenty-five percent of the population that said they seldom or never attend religious services.²⁵ Church attendance is certainly not the only religious activity one might employ in order to foster a deeper relationship with God. However, historically at least, Christians have struggled to understand a relationship with God that did not include active participation in religious services.

Sixty-three percent of Texans say they pray daily while seventeen percent answered that they seldom or never pray, the next highest category. When surveyed about the frequency with which one participates in a prayer, scripture study, or religious education group, thirty percent answered they participate at least once a week. However, forty-nine percent responded they seldom or never participate.²⁶ Again, these practices

²³ Pew Research, *Religious Landscape Study Texas*—Sixty-nine percent is absolutely certain, while nineteen percent is fairly certain. 3.

²⁴ Pew Research, "Religious," 4.

²⁵ Pew Research, "Religious," 5.

²⁶ Pew Research, "Religious," 6, 7.

are not the only ones, it seems, that are used to help enrich one's relationship with God, but one might wonder if belief in God is so important, why does there appear to be such a disconnect between affirmation and practice? Beyond just affirming belief, how does action support what is said to be so important?

Episcopalians account for only one percent of the seventy-seven percent of Texans identifying as Christians. Looking at the Episcopal Church in Texas could provide something of a microcosm of religion in Texas.

The Episcopal Church in Texas

There are five full Episcopal dioceses and parts of a sixth in the state of Texas—the Dioceses of Texas, West Texas, Dallas, Fort Worth, Northwest Texas and a portion of Rio Grande. These dioceses along with Arkansas, Kansas, Oklahoma, West Missouri, Western Kansas, and Western Louisiana comprise Province Seven of the Episcopal Church. The total baptized membership of Province Seven in 2007 was 250,255. By 2017, that number had decreased to 210,064.²⁷ The Diocese of Texas is the largest diocese in this province and also shows a decline during this same time period from 82,801 in 2007 to 75,969 in 2017. Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) showed a decrease as well from 88,087 in 2007 to 69,042 in 2017. ASA in the Diocese of Texas at 27,994 in 2007 decreased to 23,596 in 2017.²⁸

The Diocese of Texas includes two of the top fifteen U.S. cities in population—Houston and Austin. These two cities, and their surrounding areas, are areas where the

²⁷ https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/2_baptized_members_by_province_and_diocese_2007-2017.pdf.

²⁸ https://www.episcopalchurch.org/files/3_average_sunday_attendance_by_province_and_diocese_2007-2017.pdf.

Diocese of Texas is currently planting new churches. While numbers reveal a decrease, the Diocese of Texas is working in the growing areas and a level of experimentation seems to be embedded in the DNA of the Diocese of Texas.

One institution, through which the Diocese of Texas has affected life in the wider Episcopal Church is the Seminary of the Southwest—officially named The Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest. Lawrence Brown wrote concerning the beginning of the seminary:

The founding of the Episcopal Theological Seminary of the Southwest in Austin came about through practical necessity, and was a tentative step, testing the waters, so to speak, to see if it should merely meet a temporary need, or should persist and fulfill the longtime desire to have such an institution in the Province of the Southwest.²⁹

Flexible experimentation seemed to allow for trying out the idea of a seminary in the southwest region of the United States. If it did not work out, there was the belief that something else could be tried. Writing thirty years after the Seminary of the Southwest began, Brown further reflected:

The curriculum of the school was appropriate and helpful in the boom times in which it was developed, but in the sixties, when unrest and reaction against what many believed to be radicalism in the purposes and program of the Seminary took hold, a new program and approach were called for. Adjustments were made where it was felt necessary. But on the whole, after thirty years of its life, contributions of the Seminary of the Southwest to the entire Church have been great, and the foundations in thought and method laid in early days, however modified, have endured to give a flavor and strength to those it has touched, and to the Churches ministered to by its graduates.³⁰

If the possibility existed that the Seminary of the Southwest might not be a long-term solution, then it seems there was a collective history of ministry ideas that did not

²⁹ Lawrence L. Brown, *The Episcopal Church in Texas: Volume II 1875-1965, The Diocese of Texas* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 1985), 215.

³⁰ Brown, *The Episcopal Church*, 219-220.

always have to go past the short-term. A gift worthy of contributing to the wider Church might be the ability to try something and walk away, if need be, and then try something else.

Of note, as well, in the Diocese of Texas are some of the largest churches in the Episcopal Church. According to 2018 parochial reports, fifteen churches in the Diocese of Texas recorded a membership of over 1,000.³¹ The fifteen churches are listed in the table below with membership and ASA.

15 Churches in the Diocese of Texas with Membership of 1,000+

St. Martin’s Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas	Membership: 9,490	ASA: 1,678
St. John the Divine Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas	Membership: 4,654	ASA: 862
Christ Church Cathedral, Houston, Texas	Membership: 3,906	ASA: 735
Good Shepherd Episcopal Church, Austin, Texas	Membership: 3,555	ASA: 665
St. David’s Episcopal Church, Austin, Texas	Membership: 1,976	ASA: 551
Palmer Memorial Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas	Membership: 1,730	ASA: 351
Christ Church Episcopal, Tyler, Texas	Membership: 1,663	ASA: 424
Trinity Episcopal Church, The Woodlands, Texas	Membership: 1,661	ASA: 465
St. Matthew’s Episcopal Church, Austin, Texas	Membership: 1,526	ASA: 401
All Saints Episcopal Church, Austin, Texas	Membership: 1,496	ASA: 213
St. Francis Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas	Membership: 1,407	ASA: 302
St. Cuthbert’s Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas	Membership: 1,211	ASA: 253
St. Dunstan’s Episcopal Church, Houston, Texas	Membership: 1,171	ASA: 302
San Francisco de Asis, Austin, Texas	Membership: 1,157	ASA: 180
St. Paul’s Episcopal Church, Waco, Texas	Membership: 1,126	ASA: 243

³¹ <https://www.epicenter.org/congregational-life/congregational-vitality>.

Of the fifteen churches referenced, thirteen are located inside the Houston/Austin areas. Though these fifteen churches record large memberships, none record an Average Sunday Attendance (ASA) of fifty percent of their membership. If the numbers of those participating in corporate worship are lower than total membership records, what other practices aid in one's relationship with God? Perhaps we should ask, what kind of tools are parishes providing to help one experience a deeper relationship with God?

The Role of Religion at St. Paul's, Waco

The city of Waco is located on Interstate 35, placing Waco halfway between Dallas/Fort Worth and Austin. Located on Interstate 35, Waco is located 104 miles north of Austin and 183 miles northwest of Houston, which makes Waco the northernmost city in the Western region of the Diocese of Texas. Intertwined with Waco is the presence of Baylor University, referred to as the largest Baptist university in the world. Baylor was chartered in 1845, making it the oldest continuously operating university in Texas. Baylor strongly affirms its religious heritage, and in 1993, George W. Truett Theological Seminary was founded. While Baylor has historic Southern Baptist roots, not all Baptist churches in Waco are Southern Baptist. One can find a wide spectrum of belief and practice amongst Baptists in Waco.

St. Paul's is a parish in which a spectrum of beliefs can be found as well. Parishioners work as university professors, bankers, attorneys, school teachers, doctors, ranchers, and other related fields. Many St. Paul's parishioners have served and continue to serve in the civic life of Waco. Perhaps the most well-known program at St. Paul's is St. Paul's Episcopal School. Founded in 1956 by a St. Paul's parishioner, St. Paul's School has been a leader in private education in Waco and has educated many Waco

citizens over its sixty-plus years. Like many Episcopal schools, the reach of St. Paul's School goes beyond those identifying as Episcopalian or even Christian. St. Paul's Church and School have worked together to welcome many onto the church/school campus.

In part because of its location, St. Paul's has been a leader in the diocese. Hosting Diocesan Council in 1962 made logical sense as Lawrence Brown explains, "St. Paul's Church, Waco, was host to the 1962 Council, appropriately, since two new missions in greater Waco were admitted at that meeting."³² Writing about the new plant in North Waco, Brown wrote, "The one in North Waco, which received the name, Church of the Holy Spirit, included cadres of active communicants furnished by all three Waco flocks."³³ St. Paul's has also had a historic relationship with the Episcopal campus ministry at Baylor University. There is historic record of St. Paul's parishioners understanding faith and religion to mean being active in life. One's relationship with God is intended to affect one's life and then to call one into some vocation of sharing. In short, though faith might be vocally quiet, it has never meant to be private. Looking at some data will give us a sense of how many people have come through St. Paul's.

As seen in the tables below, membership remained somewhat constant and even began to show slight increases beginning in 2009.³⁴ Yet, as seen in the next table, ASA during those same years reveals a significant decline.³⁵

³² Brown, *The Episcopal Church*, 258.

³³ Brown, *The Episcopal Church*, 258.

³⁴ St. Paul's Annual Reports (Waco, TX, 1992-2018).

³⁵ St. Paul's Annual Reports (Waco, TX, 1992-2018).

Membership at St. Paul's from 1992-2018

1992: 974	2001: 951	2010: 1043
1993: 970	2002: 926	2011: 1062
1994: 990	2003: 934	2012: 1079
1995: 1005	2004: 904	2013: 1118
1996: 998	2005: 915	2014: 1130
1997: 1048	2006: 943	2015: 1111
1998: 900	2007: 962	2016: 1127
1999: 921	2008: 996	2017: 1136
2000: 925	2009: 1009	2018: 1126

ASA at St. Paul's from 1992-2018

1992: 527	2001: 359	2010: 311
1993: 505	2002: 341	2011: 307
1994: 454	2003: 327	2012: 299
1995: 415	2004: 306	2013: 284
1996: 421	2005: 336	2014: 285
1997: 390	2006: 336	2015: 291
1998: 389	2007: 320	2016: 259
1999: 389	2008: 324	2017: 249
2000: 344	2009: 306	2018: 243

One can also read through reports and hear stories of all that has taken place at St. Paul's during these same years. Outreach seen in activities such as Meals on Wheels, working with neighborhood schools, financial grants, and St. Paul's School have been and continue to be part of what it means for parishioners to live out their faith and experience God.

The social context of which St. Paul's is part resembles much of what can still be seen in the southern and Midwest regions in the United States. Still existing, at least in perception, is close to what Robert P. Jones describes:

For most of the twentieth century, in White Christian America the terms "Christian" and "Protestant" were virtually synonymous. Questions like "And where do you go to church?" felt appropriate in casual social interactions or even business exchanges. White Christian America was a place where few gave a second thought to saying "Merry Christmas!" to strangers on the street. It was a world of shared rhythms that punctuated the week: Wednesday spaghetti suppers and prayer meetings, invocations from local pastors under the Friday night lights at high school football games, and Sunday blue laws that shuttered Main Street for the Sabbath.³⁶

Though not everything Jones describes happens in every single city or town in the southern or Midwest regions, there is a similar quality to Waco which some find attractive. For many years, St. Paul's has been able to flourish in such a context. Jones writes further:

The remains of White Christian America can still be seen...they are also visible in our oldest cities, where Protestant churches with tall steeples were erected centuries ago to keep a watchful eye over the centers of civic and business functions: conducting weekly worship services, leading Sunday Schools for children, and organizing charitable work for those in need. But even though the physical structures cast shadows as long as they did in the past, their cultural reach has shortened significantly.³⁷

If it was socially acceptable to ask someone where they went to church during Christendom, then a religious community might think a person will experience a relationship with God by virtue of simply attending church.

³⁶ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 38.

³⁷ Jones, *End*, 39.

Statistics have shown that ASA and other religious practices have decreased at St. Paul's, in the Diocese of Texas, in the state of Texas, and in the United States. However, as seen in the statistics about the state of Texas, belief in God is still at a high percentage of adults. How might people experience a relationship with God, stated as important, if attendance at worship, prayer, religious education classes, etc. continue to decrease?

This chapter has looked at the term secular and how it might be defined in a context such as St. Paul's, Waco. A brief look at the beginning and fall of Christendom helped set the stage for looking at the role of religion in the United States and more specifically in the state of Texas. Contexts vary in the United States and this can be seen in how faith is practiced.

It is my belief that Ignatian Spirituality broadly, and the Ignatian Examen more specifically, are tools which can aid in deepening one's relationship with God, even in contexts when other historic practices have declined.

Making a witness as to why relationship with God is important, while always a calling for Christians, has become even more necessary in a post-Christendom context. Religious practices are declining, and more and more people no longer believe a relationship with God is even necessary. I believe the Ignatian Examen is a useful and helpful practice in secular contexts. To show why this is the case, we move now to a reflection on Ignatian Spirituality and the Ignatian Examen

Chapter Three

THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

The act of ministry which forms the core of this project is the practice of the Ignatian Examen. This current chapter will be a reflection upon the Ignatian Examen and Ignatian Spirituality and why I believe the Examen could be a helpful tool in a post-Christendom world to help foster a deep and life-giving relationship with God. Embedded in Ignatian spirituality are the dynamics of flexibility, creativity and adaptability. These dynamics are critical in a post-Christendom context. I believe Ignatius of Loyola practiced these dynamics and practiced faith in such a way that could still be helpful today.

When looking at Ignatian Spirituality, it is important to begin with some knowledge of the biography of Ignatius of Loyola. A significant aspect of Ignatian Spirituality is the belief that God can be encountered in all parts of one's life. This was true for Ignatius himself. After examining some biographical information, we will move into an explanation of Ignatian Spirituality. Within the context of Ignatian Spirituality, we will look at the Ignatian Examen, and more specifically its role in this thesis project.

Ignatius of Loyola: A Biographical Sketch

Ignatius¹ was born in Spain in 1491 and died in Rome in 1556. Though he was baptized as an infant, Ignatius's early life would not have led anyone to believe he would have the kind of impact he had on so many. For much of his young adult life, Ignatius lived

¹ He was baptized with the name Iñigo. Later in life he changed to the more Latin-sounding Ignatius. For clarity, I will only use the better-known Ignatius throughout this chapter.

a life with himself as the central character. His own biography begins, “Up to his twenty-sixth year he was a man given to worldly vanities, and having a vain and overpowering desire to gain renown, he found special delight in the exercise of arms.”² Though Ignatius himself does not give a great deal of information concerning his early life, the desire to win renown as a soldier led Ignatius to what would later be discerned as a pivotal moment in his life.

During a battle against the French in 1521, Ignatius was severely wounded in battle. His leadership capabilities, though, were seen on that day. His biography records:

He was in a fortress under attack by the French and while everyone else clearly saw that they could not defend themselves and thought that they should surrender to save their lives, he offered so many reasons to the fortress’ commander that he talked him into defending it. Though this was contrary to the opinion of all the other knights, still each drew encouragement from his firmness and fearlessness.³

James Martin writes, “During a battle in Pamplona in 1521, the aspiring soldier’s leg was struck and shattered by a cannonball, which led to several months of painful recuperation. The initial operation on the leg was botched, and Iñigo, who wanted his leg to look good in the fashionable tights of the day, submitted to a further series of gruesome operations. The surgery would leave him with a lifelong limp.”⁴

Ignatius was able to recover and heal from his surgeries at his family home in Loyola. To pass the time, he hoped to read about knights in battle winning great acclaim. However, he learned from a family member that the only books available in the house to

² Joseph N. Tylanda, trans., *A Pilgrim’s Journey: The Autobiography of Ignatius of Loyola* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2001), 37.

³ Tylanda, *Journey*, 37-38.

⁴ James Martin, *The Jesuit Guide to (Almost) Everything: A Spirituality for Real Life* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2010), 11.

read were one on the life of Jesus and the other on the lives of the saints. He began reading these books and after reading for a period of time, he would pause and daydream.

Ignatius would often daydream about the many pursuits of a knight. After reading about Jesus and the saints, he would also imagine himself in the shoes of the saints. His biography says, “While reading the life of our Lord and those of the saints, he used to pause and meditate, reasoning with himself: ‘What if I were to do what Saint Francis did, or to do what Saint Dominic did?’ Thus in his thoughts he dwelt on many good deeds, always suggesting to himself great and difficult ones, but as soon as he considered doing them, they all appeared easy of performance.”⁵

Upon reflecting on his daydreams, Ignatius discerned something in himself. He would spend time imagining himself as a knight and then spend time imagining himself living as one of the saints. His biography records:

When he thought of worldly matters, he found much delight; but after growing weary and dismissing them, he found that he was dry and unhappy. But when he thought of going barefoot to Jerusalem and eating nothing but herbs and imitating the saints in all the austerities they practiced, he not only found consolation in these thoughts, but even after they had left him he remained happy and joyful.⁶

This experience is crucial to understanding Ignatian Spirituality, because Ignatius would reflect and come to believe that his feelings, thoughts, and dreams could be places to experience God’s grace and to discern God’s calling.

After he had recuperated, Ignatius decided to devote himself to God for the rest of his life. Despite protests from his family, he renounced his life as a soldier and decided to

⁵ Tylenda, *Journey*, 47.

⁶ Tylenda, *Journey*, 48.

follow God, wherever the path might lead. Ignatius moved to a nearby town called Manresa and spent a year trying to follow God by adopting practices and trying to follow them strictly. This time brought darkness and dryness to Ignatius. He wondered if he could ever really follow God as he felt he should. He also discerned how dependent upon God's grace he was, and this idea of dependence brought great comfort to him. Ignatius began to moderate some of his strict practices and began to experience a deep joy. It was also during this time in Manresa that Ignatius would write many of the things he was learning about being in relationship with God. These lessons would eventually form the core of the well-known *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*—a classic in Christian spirituality.

After a long process of discerning what to do, Ignatius felt called to serve the Church as a priest, which meant pursuing more education. He began his studies at two Spanish universities and then made his way to the University of Paris. It was in Paris that Ignatius met classmates who became his friends, and with these friends he would form what would eventually become known as the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). In his history of the Jesuits, John O'Malley states:

On February 2, 1528, a devout Basque nobleman, Iñigo de Loyola, arrived in Paris. At the advanced age of thirty-seven, he intended to pursue a degree at the university...At Sainte-Barbe he shared lodgings with two much younger students, Pierre Favre and Francisco Xavier. Friendships formed among them and then expanded to include four more students—Diego Laínez, Alfonso Salmerón, Nicolás Bobadilla, and Simão Rodrigues.⁷

O'Malley further describes this group, "On August 15 during a mass celebrated by Favre, the only priest among them at the time, they bound themselves to this course of

⁷ John W. O'Malley, *The Jesuits: A History from Ignatius to the Present* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 1.

action as well as to a life of poverty...They did not realize at the time that on that fateful August 15, 1534, they took the first step that led six years later to the founding of the Society of Jesus.”⁸ These friends were attracted to the way in which Ignatius learned to follow God. The Spiritual Exercises, which Ignatius continued to develop, proved helpful in his friend’s own relationships with God.

The friendship Ignatius experienced with God and then shared with his friends was possible because Ignatius believed there was not any part of his life left untouched by the grace of Jesus Christ. Included in his Spiritual Exercises is his prayer, *Anima Christi*:

Soul of Christ, sanctify me. Body of Christ, save me. Blood of Christ inebriate me. Water from the side of Christ, wash me. Passion of Christ, strengthen me. O good Jesu, hear me; Within Thy wounds hide me; Suffer me not to be separated from Thee; From the malignant enemy defend me; In the hour of my death call me, And bid me come to Thee, that with Thy saints I may praise Thee, For ever and ever. Amen.⁹

Ignatius wanted communion with Jesus to affect every aspect of his life. The more his awareness of God’s grace developed the deeper his friendship with Jesus grew. It is this kind of growth and awareness that Ignatius, through the Spiritual Exercises, wanted to share with others. Though the Spiritual Exercises are not directly part of this thesis project, they are at the core of Ignatian Spirituality. Kevin O’Brien wrote concerning Ignatius’s thinking:

Ignatius gave the church the Spiritual Exercises as a testament to God’s gentle, persistent laboring in his life. Over his lifetime, Ignatius became convinced that the Exercises could help other people draw closer to God and discern God’s call in their lives, much as they had helped him. The Exercises have never been for Jesuits alone. Ignatius crafted the Exercises as a layman, and he intended them to benefit

⁸ O’Malley, *The Jesuits*, 2.

⁹ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius: Saint Ignatius’ Profound Precepts of Mystical Theology*. Translated by Anthony Mottola (New York, NY: Image Books, 1964), 36

the entire church. He honed them as he offered the Exercises to a variety of people.¹⁰

These friends continued to live, serve and learn from each other. They petitioned the Pope to approve their group as a religious order and in 1540, Pope Paul III officially approved the Society of Jesus.

Ignatius fulfilled a needed administrative role as he was elected the first Superior General of the Jesuits. He would spend the rest of his life in Rome as he wrote the Jesuit Constitutions, and as the Society of Jesus grew, he would send new friends to all parts of the world. The constitutions also revealed much of Ignatius's thinking that continues to shape the Jesuits today. O'Malley writes:

The constitutions were based on a presupposition that psychological or spiritual growth will take place and they provided for it by prescribing certain things as appropriate for beginners and suggesting others as appropriate for more seasoned members. In doing so the constitutions evince a judicious mix of firmness and flexibility that allowed the Society to adapt to changing circumstances and still retain its identity. Undergirding it was an implicit theological assumption of the compatibility of Christianity with the best of secular culture.¹¹

This biographical sketch reveals some of Ignatius's life, situations, and events that influenced and shaped how he understood his relationship with God and how that became an example to his friends. We will now reflect upon some of the distinctiveness of Ignatian Spirituality and, looking at the Spiritual Exercises and Examen, will see how Ignatius might have something to offer in a post-Christendom context.

Ignatian Spirituality: An Overview

James Martin is helpful in explaining what he believes the different Christian "spiritualities" mean:

¹⁰ Kevin O'Brien, *The Ignatian Adventure: Experiencing the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius in Daily Life* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2011), 13.

¹¹ O'Malley, *The Jesuits*, 11.

A spirituality is a way of living in relationship with God. Within the Christian tradition, all spiritualities, no matter what their origins, have the same focus—the desire for union with God, an emphasis on love and charity, and a belief in Jesus as the Son of God. But each spirituality emphasize different aspects of the tradition—one accents the contemplative life, another the active life. This one emphasizes joy, this one freedom, this one awareness, this one sacrifice, this one service to the poor. All these emphases are important in every Christian spirituality, but they are highlighted differently by each spiritual school.¹²

If one wants to try to get to the core of Ignatian Spirituality, Martin suggests four statements: 1. Finding God in all things; 2. Becoming contemplative in action; 3. Looking at the world in an incarnational way; 4. Seeking freedom and detachment.¹³ These four statements provide an outline to understanding the distinctiveness of Ignatian Spirituality. The first two statements, I believe, in the context of St. Paul's, Waco, offer the most compelling reasons for practicing the Examen and being attracted to Ignatian Spirituality.

I. Finding God In All Things

Finding God in all things, perhaps more than any other, is the statement most associated with Ignatian Spirituality, and it is especially important to clarify what is meant by this statement. I do not believe Ignatius thought everything was God or God is synonymous with creation or God causes situations—good or bad—to happen. Ronald Modras helps explain, “There is a Trinitarian sweep to Ignatian spirituality. No distant watch-maker/architect or self-absorbed thinker, God in the Spiritual Exercises is ‘one who is laboring,’ not only creating the universe but also reconciling it in and through Christ.”¹⁴ Monika Hellwig also writes, “Ignatian spirituality is grounded in intense

¹² Martin, *Jesuit*, 2.

¹³ Martin, *Jesuit*, 10.

¹⁴ Ronald Modras, *Ignatian Humanism: A Dynamic Spirituality for the 21st Century* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2004), 40.

gratitude and reverence. It begins with and continually reverts to the awareness of the essence and power and care of God everywhere, for everyone, and at all times.”¹⁵

Hellwig goes on to explain:

This sense of a wholly integrated universe, society, and personal life is one that certainly still existed in the Spain of Ignatius’ youth, but was rapidly disintegrating for most people in his mature years. In his youth he lived in a culture in which intimacy with God, and a sense of belonging and being protected, could still be taken for granted, requiring no special effort or attention on the part of the individual. By the time Ignatius was guiding other people through the Exercises, the culture did not automatically convey such a sense of intimacy with God, so that the individual had to make a deliberate effort to cultivate it. That, of course, is very much the case in our own culture, in which people can live most of their lives without ever being confronted with the question of the ultimate meaning and purpose of their lives.¹⁶

In my own experience, “Finding God in all things,” drew me to further explore Ignatian Spirituality. As a priest, I regularly lead public worship. I enjoy seeing people in church, and I believe being a regular part of a worshipping community is vitally important in life. I resonate with James Martin’s description of *Finding God in all things*, “That deceptively simple phrase was once considered revolutionary. It means that nothing is considered outside the purview of the spiritual life. Ignatian Spirituality is not confined within the walls of a church. It’s not a spirituality that considers only “religious” topics, like prayer and sacred texts, as part of a person’s spiritual life.”¹⁷

I began to understand and see where God’s presence was felt throughout my own life. Because I began seeing all aspects of my life in a different way, I wanted to learn

¹⁵ Monika K. Hellwig, “Finding God in All Things: A Spirituality for Today,” in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader: Contemporary Writings on St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Spiritual Exercises, Discernment, and More*, ed. George W. Traub (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), 52.

¹⁶ Hellwig, “Finding,” 53.

¹⁷ Martin, *Jesuit*, 5.

whether parishioners would have a similar experience. The significance of communal worship has not diminished for me, but I have been able to grasp the presence of God in a multitude of places. Martin, for me at least, helpfully explains, “Ignatian spirituality considers everything an important element of your life. That includes religious services, sacred Scriptures, prayer, and charitable works, to be sure, but it also includes friends, family, work, relationships, sex, suffering, and joy, as well as nature, music, and pop culture.”¹⁸

There is a chance to learn from others because God engages with each of us differently. Speaking about adaptability in the Spiritual Exercises, Kevin O’Brien writes, “Ignatius’ own conversion taught him that God works with each person uniquely, so he insisted that the Exercises be adapted to meet the particular needs of the one making them. The goal is drawing closer to God, not mechanically running through all the exercises in order or in unison with others. In other words, the end of the Exercises is a Person, not a performance.”¹⁹ David Fleming also explains, “Ignatian spirituality is not captured in a rule or set of practices or a certain method of praying or devotional observances. It is a spiritual ‘way of proceeding’ that offers a vision of life, an understanding of God, a reflective approach to living, a contemplative form of praying, a reverential attitude to our world, and an expectation of finding God daily.”²⁰

Ignatius, living and ministering in a specific time and context, seemed to understand that as a person encountered God, in a different time and context, those stories would be different, yet they still would reveal God lovingly encountering each person.

¹⁸ Martin, *Jesuit*, 5.

¹⁹ O’Brien, *Ignatian*, 19.

²⁰ David L. Fleming, *What is Ignatian Spirituality?* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), vii.

Describing their experiences as women practicing the Spiritual exercises, Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin and Elizabeth Liebert write:

In contrast to the notion that holiness requires a life of solitude, silence and withdrawal from the world, Ignatian spirituality offers the possibility of experiencing God in one's daily life. Because of the complexity of modern life, women's situations today, regardless of the lifestyle, differs radically from the sixteenth century. Many act as the sole care-givers for spouse, children, and parents. An increasing number find themselves working double shifts, one at their paid work outside the home and another attending to a never-ending round of domestic duties...the spirituality that flows from the Spiritual Exercise suits Christians in any lifestyle, for it invites them to understand the call in the midst of their own lives.²¹

Finding God in all things, as Ignatius believed, begins in gratitude to a loving God. The love of God, extending to all, is not the private possession of a person or institution. Because we are different, how that love is understood and experienced can be different. This difference is affirmed as a strength in Ignatian Spirituality. The different stories we have and the chance to learn from each other can enhance our own experience with God.

Embedded in finding God in all things is the concept of awareness. Ignatian Spirituality does not hold up the idea that God is just now beginning to work. Instead, God has always been working and the work of being open belongs to humans. To be sure, the work of being open requires God's grace, believing God will reveal what should be seen. Though awareness and contemplation are certainly part of Ignatian Spirituality, it is important to be clear what contemplation entails in Ignatian Spirituality.

²¹ Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert. *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2001), 8.

II. *Contemplative in Action*

Contemplation, reflection, and meditation are not unique to Ignatian Spirituality. Often times it might look like withdrawing to the degree someone is able to silence the surrounding noise so that personal reflection can take place. The contemplation Ignatius practiced, though, was not within the walls of a monastery. Ignatius could not imagine withdrawing from the dynamics of life, as real and difficult as they can be, in order to focus and reflect upon God. Contemplation, for Ignatius, was not another task in a long list of tasks to accomplish in a busy life. James Martin writes, “Most of us lead busy lives with little time for prayer and meditation. But by being aware of the world around us—in the midst of our activity—we can allow a contemplative stance to inform our actions. Instead of seeing the spiritual life as one that can exist only if it is enclosed by the walls of a monastery, Ignatius asks you to see the world as your monastery.”²² In my own practice, I have been able to experience this truth. Being contemplative in action becomes more of a way to move through life.

Being contemplative in action also means contemplation and action are not seen as being mutually exclusive or in competition. Along these lines, Monika Hellwig writes:

In Ignatian Spirituality this does not mean that one no longer engages in worldly responsibilities or in social, economic, and political affairs. What it does mean is that engagement in such affairs ceases to be profane, which means outside the range of the religious commitment. All the secular activities of life are brought into the faith commitment and are therefore brought under scrutiny and evaluation in the light of what is revealed in Christ about the meaning and purpose and true orientation of all creation.²³

²² Martin, *Jesuit*, 8.

²³ Hellwig, “Finding,” 56.

I have found, at least for some in post-Christendom, faith and church attendance have meant escaping from a secular world and not having to face challenges that certainly exist. Again, Hellwig is most helpful, writing:

The commitment to action and to public responsibilities often meets an objection of another kind. This is the view that contemplation is at the heart of religious faith, and that contemplation and action are incompatible with one another. Contemplation is certainly at the heart of faith, because contemplation means an attitude of receptivity, attention, and awareness of divine presence and guidance...Ignatian spirituality refuses to see contemplation as being in opposition to action or incompatible with it...What is seen as incompatible with contemplation is greed, possessiveness, acquisitiveness, cruelty, indifference to the needs of others, pride, self-assertiveness, and preoccupation with oneself and one's public image. But hard work, preoccupation with serving the needs of others, and so forth, are seen as opportunities to be contemplative in action.²⁴

Finding God in all things and being contemplative in action are, perhaps, the two most known descriptions of Ignatian Spirituality. Though much more could be said, I believe these two descriptions have helped set the theological context for reflection upon the Ignatian Examen.

The Ignatian Examen: An Introduction and Reflection

As I became more familiar with the Ignatian Examen, I found myself drawn to this prayer practice, in part, because of its simplicity but also because the focus was upon what had happened in my day. As my understanding of *Finding God in all Things* deepened, I did not have to look for the rare mountain-top experiences but could find peace and joy in the routine and even mundane parts of my life. Jim Manney writes:

The subject matter of the Examen is your life—specifically the day you have just lived through. The Examen looks for signs of God's presence in the events of the day: lunch with a friend, a walk in the park, a kind word from a colleague, a challenge met, a duty discharged. The Examen likes the humdrum. God is present in the transcendent "spiritual" moments, but he's also there when you cook dinner, write a memo, answer email, and run errands. The Examen looks at your

²⁴ Hellwig, "Finding," 56.

conscious experience. The ebb and flow of your moods and feelings are full of spiritual meaning. Nothing is so trivial that it's meaningless.²⁵

Because one might not expect the routine and mundane to be places where God is experienced, it does take effort to practice awareness. Ignatian Spirituality teaches that this process of awareness is a work of grace. We cannot do it on our own. Jim Manney further explains, "The Examen is a method of reviewing your day in the presence of God. It's actually an attitude more than a method, a time set aside for thankful reflection on where God is in your everyday life."²⁶ George Aschenbrenner is helpful describing what is meant by an examen of consciousness as compared to an examen of conscience.

Aschenbrenner writes:

When examen is related to discernment, it becomes examen of consciousness rather than of conscience. Examen of conscience has narrow moralistic overtones. Its prime concern was with the good or bad actions we have done each day. Whereas in discernment the prime concern is not with the morality of good or bad actions; rather the concern is with the way God is affecting and moving us (often quite spontaneously!) deep in our own affective consciousness.²⁷

Ignatius' own steps in the Method of Making the General Examination of Conscience are as follows:

1. The first point is to render thanks to God for the favors we have received.
2. The second point is to ask the grace to know my sins and to free myself from them.
3. The third point is to demand an account of my soul from the moment of rising until the present examination; either hour by hour or from one period to another. I shall first make an examination of my thoughts, then my words, and then my actions in the same order as that in the Particular Examination of Conscience.
4. The fourth point is to ask pardon of God our Lord for my failings.
5. The fifth point is to resolve to amend my life with the help of God's grace. Close with the "Our Father."²⁸

²⁵ Jim Manney, *A Simple Life-Changing Prayer: Discovering the power of St. Ignatius Loyola's Examen* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2011), 2.

²⁶ Manney, *Simple*, 1.

²⁷ George Aschenbrenner, "Consciousness Examen," (1972), 1-8, accessed November 12, 2019, <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen/consciousness-examen>.

²⁸ Ignatius of Loyola, *Exercises*, 53.

Ignatius's own language might feel cumbersome for how we talk and think today. Remembering that flexibility and adaptability are hallmarks of Ignatian Spirituality, Jim Manney offers his own steps for praying the Examen:

1. Ask God for light.
2. Give thanks.
3. Review the day.
4. Face your shortcomings.
5. Look toward the day to come.²⁹

Comparing these two sets of steps, one can see that they are not in the same order. This fits well within the flexibility of the Examen. Ignatius's point was to pray the Examen, not rigidly follow the steps as he laid them out.³⁰ Ignatius was so committed to the role of the Examen that in the midst of a busy life, other practices could be set aside but not the Examen. David Fleming explains, "Ignatius wanted his Jesuits to make the Examen a daily habit. He understood that the press of work or illness might sometimes make it impossible for a Jesuit to have an extended time of daily prayer. But he insisted that they never omit the Examen... This is one of the few rules Ignatius laid down for prayer."³¹

Thinking about the place of the Examen inside the Spiritual Exercises, it is important to remember that the introduction to the Examen happens quite early as one makes the Spiritual Exercises. Kevin O'Brien states, "...the purpose of the Exercises is

²⁹ Manney, *Simple*, 1.

³⁰ My own steps for praying the Examen are 1. *Ask for God's grace to reflect honestly on your day.* 2. *Replay the day—Where did I encounter God today? What gave me joy today? Give thanks for all those moments—regardless of being big or small.* 3. *Replay the day—Where did God seem absent? How did I fall short or When was there a lack of joy? Repent of any mistakes or failures.* 4. *If so moved, make 1 to 2 concrete resolutions for the next day.*

³¹ Fleming, *Ignatian*, 20.

very practical: to grown in union with God, who frees us to make good decisions about our lives and to help souls.”³² Union with God grows as one becomes more aware of God throughout their life. Ignatius breaks the Exercises down to four weeks, though not as calendar weeks but rather periods of time. O’Brien helps explain that discernment is at the heart of making the Spiritual Exercises. He writes:

In the course of the Exercises, some people make important life decisions. The decision may concern a significant relationship, a career or religious vocation, or a change in lifestyle or habits of living. The Exercises provide many helps in making such decisions. The key is being open to the Spirit, who will present us with these decisions and guide us in making them. For others, the Exercises are not about making a big decision about what to do but about how to be. In other words, they teach us how to live, think, pray, love, and relate in the context of commitment we’ve already made.³³

The Examen fits into this overall process of learning to discern and follow the leading of the Holy Spirit. Learning to find God in all things by using the Examen is really just the beginning of following Ignatius’ example.

I found Jim Manney’s steps a simple place to begin practicing the Examen. For much of my early experience, I wrote his steps down and followed them in my own prayer time. Using his short and simple directions, we will reflect upon each of the steps of the Examen and then some of the benefits of this prayer practice.

I. Ask God for Light

Asking God for light is not simply a request because the Examen has to begin somehow. Because one is reflecting back on one’s day to see where God was present, this task requires divine help. Dennis Hamm explains, “Since we are not simply daydreaming or reminiscing but rather looking for some sense of how the Spirit of God is leading us, it

³² O’Brien, *Ignatian*, 14.

³³ O’Brien, *Ignatian*, 17.

only makes sense to pray for some illumination. The goal is not simply memory but graced understanding. That's a gift from God devoutly to be begged."³⁴

Most days, my practice is to pray the Examen in the morning over the previous day. There are some days in which I do not pray during my regular time. I have prayed the Examen later in the day but the longer I go into a day, the further I am removed from the previous one. My experience has helped me see where God's light is needed, not only to remember but also to have, as Dennis Hamm describes, "graced understanding."

Mark Thibodeaux describes this step as requesting the Spirit to lead me through my review of the day. He writes, "I want to look at the moments in my day when I did not act so well. However, before doing so, I ask God to fill me with his Spirit so that the Spirit can lead me through this difficult soul-searching. Otherwise, I'm liable to hide in denial, wallow in self-pity, or seethe in self-loathing."³⁵ In short, asking for God's light or the leading of the Spirit is integral to the Examen, because it takes effort to be aware and that effort requires divine help.

II. Give Thanks

To say gratitude is at the heart of the Examen is something of an understatement. George Aschenbrenner, translating the Principle and Foundation in Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises, writes, "Human beings are created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of doing this to save their souls. The other things on the face of the earth are created for human beings, to help them in the pursuit of the end for which they

³⁴ Dennis Hamm, "Rummaging for God: Praying Backwards through Your Day," in *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader: Contemporary Writings on St. Ignatius of Loyola, the Spiritual Exercises, Discernment, and More*, ed. George W. Traub (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2008), 107.

³⁵ Mark E. Thibodeaux, *Reimagining the Ignatian Examen: Fresh Ways to Pray from Your Day* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2015), x.

were created.”³⁶ The action of praising and serving is not initiated by humans but rather is in response to God’s love. Aschenbrenner explains further:

As a being created by God, you are involved in a relationship with the Creator that gleams with a moment-by-moment immediacy...An awareness of this immediacy at any moment can startle your soul and excite your heart in a rush of awe...Such awareness settles the soul in a state of awe and wonder that opens up a whole new vision, especially of yourself but also of all reality.³⁷

For Ignatius, it is vitally important to remember that the gratitude expressed by humans is in response to God’s already existing love. It is an invitation to join God in relationship. Timothy Gallagher explains,

The Examen begins with what is most fundamental in our spiritual lives. When the Scriptures record the history of God’s saving work in the world, the primary reality is always what God does. Ignatius says what God continually does is to pour out gifts upon this people, past and present. The first step in the Examen consists of recognizing the primary reality that shapes our daily lives.³⁸

If gratitude is at the heart of the Examen, then for Ignatius, the most serious of sins is ingratitude. George Aschenbrenner writes, “When we become too affluently involved with ourselves and deny our inherent poverty, then we lose the gifts and either begin to make demands for what we think we deserve (often leading to angry frustration) or we blandly take for granted all that comes our way.”³⁹ Practicing gratitude does not always come naturally. Jim Manney reflects:

Human beings seem to have a built-in urge to pray. But for many of us, gratitude doesn’t come naturally. Speaking for myself, I’m much more inclined to take note of what I don’t have than to thank anybody for what I do have. I take my blessings for granted. We begin the Examen with prayers of gratitude, but it’s also

³⁶ George A. Aschenbrenner, *Stretched for Greater Glory: What to expect from the Spiritual Exercises* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2004), 38.

³⁷ Aschenbrenner, *Stretched*, 39.

³⁸ Timothy M. Gallagher, *The Examen Prayer: Ignatian Wisdom for Our Lives Today* (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 2006), 60.

³⁹ Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness,” 4.

true that the Examen will develop within us the habit of gratitude. It does this by focusing our attention on specific, tangible gifts that God has given us.⁴⁰

Gratitude is expressed for the tangible and concrete. Nothing is beyond the scope of giving thanks. Dennis Hamm suggests, “Use whatever cues help you to walk through the day from the moment of awakening—even the dreams you recall upon awakening. Walk through the past twenty-four hours, from hour to hour, from place to place, task to task, person to person, thanking the Lord for every gift you encounter.”⁴¹

It should also be remembered that the work of giving thanks for the tangible is not the work of only adults or the “super-faithful.” Children can also pray a form of the Examen from a very young age. Though not a children’s book, the authors of *Sleeping with Bread*, open with an illustration about children and write:

During the bombing raids of World War II, thousands of children were orphaned and left to starve. The fortunate ones were rescued and placed in refugee camps where they received food and good care. But many of these children who had lost so much could not sleep at night. They feared waking up to find themselves once again homeless and without food. Nothing seemed to reassure them. Finally, someone hit upon the idea of giving each child a piece of bread to hold at bedtime. Holding their bread, these children could finally sleep in peace. All through the night the bread reminded them, “Today I ate and I will eat again tomorrow.”⁴²

The role of gratitude in the Examen and Ignatian Spirituality can hardly be overemphasized. It is even suggested that as one gains experience with the Examen, an entire day’s practice might even be spent upon giving thanks. Ignatius, I believe, teaches the need to pray but above all, and especially in prayer, give thanks.

⁴⁰ Manney, *Simple*, 37.

⁴¹ Hamm, “Rummaging,” 107.

⁴² Dennis Linn, Sheila Fabricant Linn, and Matthew Linn, *Sleeping with Bread: Holding What Gives You Life* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1995), 1.

III. *Face Your Shortcomings*

This step in the Examen can be a struggle as well, like gratitude, but for different reasons. Mark Thibodeaux explains:

The Ignatian Examen is often confused with the Examination of Conscience. They are similar in that they both lead a person through a review of his or her life. But these two prayer experiences have different goals. The Examination of Conscience prepares you to confess your sins and ask for forgiveness. You spend all your prayer time looking at your sinful actions in the past. The goal of the Ignatian Examen includes a reflection on sin and forgiveness, but it is much broader. The objective is to explore with God all the facets of my past, present, and future life, not just the bad parts in the past.⁴³

There is certainly a place to reflect upon what is wrong when praying the Examen. Part of the difficulty might be, as Jim Manney explains, understanding what we mean by sin or fault. After reflecting upon the word fault and sin and then thinking about “major” sins such as lying, stealing, or killing, Manney found the metaphor of failure helpful for him. He writes:

The best metaphor for sin is failure. We fall short of our own ideal. We don't thwart God so much as we thwart ourselves...the Examen helps us fix what's wrong by clarifying things. Failure is a pervasive, all-encompassing condition of life. Some of it is our responsibility and some of it isn't. Sometimes we accept responsibility when we shouldn't and shirk responsibility when we should accept it.⁴⁴

When reflecting upon sin or failure, the most appropriate response is to seek God's forgiveness. Aschenbrenner explains, “This contrition and sorrow is not a shame nor a depression at our weakness but a faith experience as we grow in our realization of our dear God's awesome desire that we love with every ounce of our being.”⁴⁵ While some liturgical traditions have the sacrament of confession, the examination of fault

⁴³ Thibodeaux, *Reimagining*, xvii.

⁴⁴ Manney, *Simple*, 55.

⁴⁵ Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness,” 6.

inside the Examen should not take the place of everything else in the prayer. Ignatius imagined a holistic reflection upon one's day.

IV. *Look Toward the Day to Come*

This step of the Examen might feel like making a to-do list for the next day. But, if the Principle and Foundation for the Spiritual Exercises is as a created being to be in relationship with God, then the point of the Examen is to be shaped to look, sound, and live more like God or, as Jim Manney writes, "The goal is to grow close to Christ, not to act for the sake of acting."⁴⁶

Reflecting upon places of gratitude and failure may very well bring up areas to pay attention and where one might want to grow. Our failures should lead us to ask, "How should I have acted more like Jesus in that particular situation?" The concreteness of our everyday life can bring up multitudes of situations one should not ignore. Manney explains:

Today isn't going to be what you expect. Your boss will give you a new project; people who have promised to get back to you won't do it; someone you haven't heard from in months will call or drop in; you'll open an email and discover that you have stop what you're doing and tend to a problem immediately; your spouse will be delayed at work, disrupting dinner and the evening plans; your sister will call, asking for a big favor. You can't control this pandemonium, but you do have influence over it. There are some steps you can take to get more closely aligned to Christ, who is in it all.⁴⁷

If one has fallen short in reacting in a given situation, then this step might lay out some concrete hopes of acting differently. If one is deeply grateful for the unexpected, how might one be open to other such possibilities? Growth in praying the Examen is a process. Aschenbrenner encouragingly writes, "The more we will trust and allow God to

⁴⁶ Manney, *Simple*, 63.

⁴⁷ Manney, *Simple*, 63-64.

lead our lives, the more we will experience true supernatural hope in God painfully in and through, but quite beyond, our own weak powers—an experience at times frightening and emptying but ultimately joyfully exhilarating.”⁴⁸

The steps laid out by Ignatius, Jim Manney, or Mark Thibodeaux should be understood as places to begin. Ignatius would not want the focus to be on fulfilling steps—no matter what—but on the encounter and experience of a loving God. Because of this experience, one is then changed to share that love with others.

Benefits of Praying the Ignatian Examen

If a person can be thankful for things thought as common as a conversation, card, encouraging text or an enjoyable meal, then there will not be a shortage of things to reflect upon. The Examen could offer a framework for how one might reflect in prayer. Each person has twenty-four hours and each of us will have twenty-four hours-worth of experiences. The question would be, “How aware are we of God encountering us?”

If we are committed to finding God in all things, then the mundane or boring do not have to be denied. We do not have to deny our feelings or struggles. If God already sees them, then we can honestly name them and begin to wonder what can or should happen as a result.

When one reflects upon failures, as part of the Examen, then those failures do not have to be the end of the story. We do not have to hide from our failures, because, as Jim Manney explains, “If God is a fierce Divine Scorekeeper, it’s very hard to admit fault and ask forgiveness. We’re more inclined to hope he wasn’t looking and move on. But if God loves us more than we love ourselves, we’re free to look clearly at what’s wrong and do

⁴⁸ Aschenbrenner, “Consciousness,” 7.

what's necessary to set things right."⁴⁹ Experiencing God's forgiveness can be yet another way of experiencing God's love.

As one is contemplative in action and finds God in all things, God is experienced, not as some distant being but one who is active and interested in our lives. Ignatius encountered an active and personal God, a God who loves and gives abundantly. These gifts of grace called forth in him a need to respond in relationship. Ignatius's faith was an active one. He could not understand a relationship with God without other relationships being affected as well.

The Ignatian Examen has been helpful to me, countless others, and I hoped would be helpful for the parishioners at St. Paul's. It could be helpful for those at St. Paul's because I believe it shows how connection with God is not only possible but also necessary. Connection with God brings healing. The Examen though, is not simply one's private exercise. It can also affect one's connections with others. Points of contact can be made as one sees how God is present throughout life personally and how that is seen to be true for others. The mundane and routine can become for all of us, an opportunity for sacred encounter. We will now move into a description of the act of ministry and the lived experience description of St. Paul's participants practicing the Ignatian Examen.

⁴⁹ Manney, *Simple*, 58.

Chapter Four

ACT OF MINISTRY AND PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

Describing My Personal Experience

Before describing the act of ministry in this chapter, an explanation of my own experiences is a necessary part of the phenomenological analysis. The analysis John Creswell describes begins with this first step, “Describe personal experiences with the phenomenon under study. The researcher begins with a full description of his or her own experience of the phenomenon. This is an attempt to set aside the researcher’s personal experiences (which cannot be done entirely) so that the focus can be directed to the participants in the study.”¹ For me, the Ignatian Examen has been a practice which has helped me experience a more life-giving relationship with God.

Two of the concepts, written about in Chapter Three, *Finding God in All Things* and *Contemplative in Action*, seemed to give voice to something inside me. I wanted a relationship with God that was not “other-worldly.” I did not want a relationship where I was searching for the next mountain-top experience, because my own experience indicated these kinds of experiences did not happen all that often. Ignatian Spirituality gave me the language and concepts to understand a relationship with God that used everything in life. The Examen is a prayer practice that forms the person to see God’s grace more clearly throughout all of life and to be as open as possible to the moments where it seems God is absent. Awareness and curiosity can and should be developed as the Examen is practiced more and more. As a practitioner and researcher, I needed to

¹ Creswell and Proth, *Qualitative*, 201.

describe my own experiences and understandings so I could suspend them in an attempt to more clearly hear and understand the experiences of the participants. We will now move into a description of the act of ministry at St. Paul's and a description of the participant's practice of the Ignatian Examen.

Preparation Prior to the Act of Ministry

As I began my ministry at St. Paul's in August 2018, I had an approved thesis project proposal, but I was also beginning life in a community with whom I had no real history. I spent much of Fall 2018 establishing pastoral relationships—I needed to earn the trust of St. Paul's parishioners. I visited the sick, went to the hospital, and went to lunch or breakfast with parishioners. In the course of all these pastoral contacts, parishioners had a chance to learn more about me, as one of the new priests, and I had the opportunity to learn more about them and the parish I was called to serve. Through liturgy practiced and sermons preached, I shared influences in my own life and heard what had affected parishioners.

In the course of sharing life together, I began to detect in some a deeper interest and perhaps a willingness to participate in my project. Because of the phenomenological method I am using, it was not necessary to work with a pre-set or pre-defined subgroup of parishioners. I did not require a random sample but rather a purposeful one, meaning I needed participants who were willing. I was interested in the lived experience of parishioners. Though a phenomenological analysis could take as its focus the youth, women's group, men's group, or any other smaller group of parishioners, for this project I was more interested in the experience of a wide range of parishioners.

Because of my desire to write an analysis of parishioners' experiences, I decided to seek out parishioners, based only on the prerequisite of willingness to participate in this project. Informally, I began seeking volunteers. Through ongoing conversations, I had eleven parishioners expressing an interest in participating. Upon learning of their willingness, each participant received an in-depth letter explaining the project, what was involved, what was required of them, and what they could expect as participants.²

Only two out of the eleven had any real knowledge of Ignatian Spirituality or the Examen. The participants were willing to participate because of their relationship with me, but, in order to comfortably practice the Examen, background information was necessary before the practice began. Participants were asked to practice the Ignatian Examen during Lent 2019. Throughout January and February, I offered three Christian Education classes: Introduction to Ignatius of Loyola, Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality, and an Introduction to the Ignatian Examen—open to all parishioners but especially the participants.³ All participants were strongly encouraged to attend and if they could not, a time would be set aside so that all would receive the same background information.

Prior to the beginning of Lent, I also met individually with every participant. This was in part to receive in writing, their consent to participate but also to explain fully what I needed from them by way of research data. Each participant was asked, in mid-Lent, to write a one page lived experience description of a specific time the Examen was practiced. I would provide instructions for writing a lived experience description and

² Participant letter can be found in Appendix A.

³ Class outlines can be found in Appendix B.

would provide an example of a written description from an unrelated subject.⁴ Once Lent had ended, I shared with participants that I would be interviewing them to learn of their overall experience of practicing the Examen through Lent and the interview would take between twenty and thirty minutes.⁵

As part of the consent process, I assured participants if they were cited in my thesis, their real names would not be used and they would be referred to as Participants A through I. I would not include any biographical information that might identify them. Eleven parishioners consented to be participants. It was also explained that anyone could withdraw from the project for any reason, no questions asked. By mid-Lent, when the lived experience descriptions were being written, I learned nine out of the eleven would complete the project. The nine participants ranged in age from early thirties to mid-eighties. Of the nine, four are female and five are male. With this background information in mind, and before the act of ministry and phenomenological analysis is described, it will be helpful to be reminded of the phenomenological process I followed.

Description of the Phenomenological Process

As stated in the introduction, phenomenologists struggle when strictly bound to a specific process. Butler-Kisber helps explain, “Phenomenologists are reluctant to outline a guide for inquiry for fear of making what is a nonlinear and imaginative process prescriptive.”⁶ Putting it another way, van Manen writes, “To do hermeneutic phenomenology is to attempt to accomplish the impossible: to construct a full interpretive

⁴ Instructions for writing a Lived Experience Description can be found in Appendix C.

⁵ Interview questions can be found in Appendix D.

⁶ Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 50.

description of some aspect of the lifeworld, and yet to remain aware that lived life is always more complex than any explication of meaning can reveal.”⁷ Butler-Kisber’s use of reluctance must not be confused with a lack of focus. It is not that hermeneutic phenomenology does not require focused and rigorous effort from the researcher, rather it is expands upon what is meant by “rigorous.” Understanding phenomenology as part of human science, van Manen further explains:

Human science research is rigorous when it is “strong” or “hard” in a moral and spirited sense. A strong and rigorous human science text distinguishes itself by its courage and resolve to stand up for the uniqueness and significance of the notion to which it has dedicated itself. And what does it mean to stand up for something if one is not prepared to stand out? This means also that a rigorous human science is prepared to be “soft,” “soulful,” “subtle,” and “sensitive” in its effort to bring the range of meanings of life’s phenomena to our reflective awareness.⁸

The rigor of which van Manen speaks is not a rigid adherence to a formula or procedure. However, as Butler-Kisber and Creswell point out, a process can be a helpful starting place. The actual steps followed in this thesis project should be clear while it should also be remembered that an analysis does not simply proceed in a direct linear fashion. The process I followed in my hermeneutic phenomenological analysis is as follows:

- Pull out significant statements from the field texts.
- Arrange the significant statements into smaller groups (Meaning Units) and describe those Meaning Units with one to two words.
- Write 2-4 textual descriptions for each of the Meaning Units (what was experienced).
- Write 2-4 structural descriptions (how the experience happened).
- Write a composite description of the phenomenon.⁹

⁷ van Manen, *Researching*, 18.

⁸ van Manen, *Researching*, 18.

⁹ As shared in Chapter One, the process I followed is strongly influenced by Creswell (pg. 201) and Hobbs (pg. 121). Wording and order might vary, but the process I followed fits within the phenomenological work of others.

Participants returned their Lived Experience Descriptions (LED) to me by the third week of Lent. For the duration of Lent, I read and reread the LEDs, increasing my own familiarity with this part of the field texts. I made notes of what seemed to jump out at me in the LEDs, the words a participant used in description and if it seemed there were similar thoughts between people's descriptions. As the season of Eastertide began, I scheduled interviews with each participant, completing the interviews by the last week of May. Combining the LEDs and interview answers provided me with the field texts needed for my analysis. The first three weeks of June were spent reading the texts and living with the descriptions. I often spent a day reading the texts and then setting them aside for a time so I could have the necessary time to reflect upon and process the texts. This first step was critical and could not be underestimated. I continued to reread the texts, even as I moved onto the next steps.

The next step was extracting significant statements from the texts. This step could not begin without familiarity with the texts. I was not simply looking for a "catchy" use of words. Rather, I was looking for statements that seemed to get at the core of what each participant was trying to describe. During this step, I pulled out sixty-eight significant statements from the texts.¹⁰

Once I compiled the list of significant statements, I looked for themes by which I could group those statements into smaller units. This was another example of flexing back toward step one as I needed to spend time reading and reflecting on points of similarity. After reflection, I settled upon seven different categories for grouping the

¹⁰ The list of sixty-eight significant statements can be found in Appendix E.

statements. For each meaning unit, I offered a description of two to three words, so that the theme for each group could be grasped quickly.

After organizing and describing each meaning unit, I sought to write two to three textual descriptions. Explaining this step, Creswell writes, “Create a description of ‘what’ the participants in the study experienced with the phenomenon.”¹¹

From the textual descriptions, I spent time reading and reflecting before moving on to the next step of description. After describing “what” happened, I wrote two to four interpretive descriptions describing “how” the experience happened. Creswell describes these statements as structural statements and writes that these are descriptions of “how the experience happened in which the inquirer reflects on the setting and context in which the phenomenon was experienced.”¹²

Upon writing structural statements, the final step was to compose a composite description. Creswell explains, “A composite description incorporates both the textual and structural descriptions...and tells the reader ‘what’ the participants experienced with the phenomenon and ‘how’ they experienced it.”¹³ Though the composite description is the final step in the phenomenological analysis, one must remember the fluidity built into this kind of work as Butler-Kisber is careful to remind: “Naturally, it is important and appropriate to check back with participants at various points in the process to help confirm or disconfirm what has emerged.”¹⁴ For me, this checking-back took place even in this final step of writing a composite description.

¹¹ Creswell and Proth, *Qualitative*, 201.

¹² Creswell and Proth, *Qualitative*, 201.

¹³ Creswell and Proth, *Qualitative*, 201.

¹⁴ Butler-Kisber, *Qualitative Inquiry*, 54.

For the remainder of this chapter, each of the Meaning Units with the two to three word descriptions will be given. The textual and interpretive descriptions will be offered along with the significant statements from each Meaning Unit. This chapter will end with the composite description, resulting from this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative inquiry.

Meaning Unit: Space and Time

Textual Descriptions: Space and Time

- Location for practicing the Examen can vary, but some participants found it beneficial returning to a specific and consistent location—i.e.—outside office space or an arboretum of flowers.
- Practicing the Examen at a consistent time each day aided in a richer experience.

Significant Statements: Space and Time

Participant A spoke of the importance of practicing the Examen consistently in the same space by saying, “I have an outside office space at home and found it very helpful and nice to do the Examen in that space.” Participant C reflected, “Spending time at the arboretum—just sitting there and being part of the moment helped me to breathe, pray and take in the experience.” For these two, finding a specific space proved helpful to them.

Participant B reflected upon the importance of space, writing, “Spirituality with God needs the right physical context.” Concerning time, B wrote, “One thing that has been made clear through this experience is how much I need a regular time set aside for this.” It became clear to B that space and time do not just simply happen, there is necessary work for this. B wrote, “When I did the Examen, I needed to do it in ways that

gave room for preparation.” Returning to the Examen at a consistent time also helped another participant who wrote, “This was an opportunity to stop for an assigned time and ponder our connectedness.” The rhythm of the Examen certainly seemed to be enhanced for the participants who returned to the same spot and time each day.

Interpretive Descriptions for Space and Time

- Though not necessary, finding a specific place and time can be helpful when practicing the Examen.
- Returning to the same place and time takes conscious effort.

Meaning Unit: Awareness¹⁵ and Connectedness

Textual Descriptions: Awareness and Connectedness

- When practicing the Examen, participants learned to experience God throughout all parts of their lives.
- A greater awareness of God affected the sense of connectedness participants had with others.
- Participants learned that developing a greater sense of awareness was a process.

Significant Statements: Awareness and Connectedness

Feeling or sensing God’s presence, as seen in the Examen, was not about searching for an encounter with God in a significant event or situation. Rather, the idea of awareness is about being conscious of what is currently happening. As an example, Participant A responded, “I started to feel God’s presence in the surrounding everything.”

¹⁵ Awareness, as it was practiced in this exercise, is seen from the perspective of faith in God. Though one might think of awareness as similar to mindfulness—what brings one joy—awareness was a conscious experience of God’s grace. Awareness was knowing that one encountered the Divine.

Being aware of the parts of one's day was felt by Participant H, who wrote, "The Examen helped me look harder at my day and be more aware."

Being aware of something bigger also helps in the regular routines of life. An example of this was encountered when Participant C shared, "Awareness of something beyond helps in managing the temporary nature of our daily lives." Connectedness could begin as one was able to slow down moving throughout one's daily schedule. On this point Participant E reflected and shared, "This project forced me to slow down and not be so busy." Describing the overall impact of the Examen, Participant F shared, "This was a nice practice that drew me closer to God." F also shared, "I began noticing God more in the small, beautiful details."

Greater awareness of God affected the awareness participants experienced of others. Participant D responded, "I have become more aware of others." This awareness was not necessarily going out of one's way for new encounters but of what was currently happening. D further stated, "I was more attuned with how I passed people in the hallway and not just rush by them." The practice of awareness, as D shared, "made me more introspective and externally aware of what was happening around me." Participant E similarly said, "I have become more introspective than I was before because of the Examen." Awareness, it seems for the participants, carried the idea of having their eyes open as they moved through the day.

Responses also revealed that skill in being aware and connected could be developed. One is not simply born being aware. Participant H wrote, "Awareness is being built in. Awareness, instead of using a check-list, is more important." Participant G wrote of the process of developing awareness, "It began to feel like it was becoming part of me."

I did it enough that there is a desire it becomes a habit. I can do it on my own and feel comfortable on my own.” H also wrote, “This is a learning process and not always an easy one.”

Interpretive Descriptions: Awareness and Connectedness

- Noticing God around you is not so much seeing something new but rather appreciating the Divine already present in the little things.
- Connecting with God is not an exhaustively private affair, but should have an affect upon connections with others.
- Awareness, important to remember, can be developed.

Meaning Unit: Growth and Understanding

Textual Descriptions: Growth and Understanding

- Practicing the Examen brought about an experience of growth in participants.
- When practicing the Examen, participants could begin to see and affirm the faith experience of others, even when different from their own.

Significant Statements: Growth and Understanding

Participant D stated, “I believe the Examen has caused me to be more steady, more present-minded, and more focused on personal growth and learning.” Reflecting upon the discerned growth, Participant E wrote, “God has used the Examen to cause me to be more thoughtful about my own action and more carefully explore my own motivations for the way I live my life.” In exploring a deeper relationship with God, Participant C wrote, “Doing this project helped me to feel a more personal connection to God and my beliefs.” As a result, Participant C reflected, “I have a better sense and

definition of faith.” Participant E also wrote along this line: “The Examen has helped me connect to the nature of who God has been.”

A better understanding of faith was made clearer to Participant C after an encounter. C described, “I met this crusty old Texan...his life and faith were about as different from mine as could be but we both still believed.” Participant I, while personally affirming a more progressive theology, was able to practice a new perspective on a Bible study: “I am part of Bible Study Fellowship. It is a conservative theology, but the recent study of John was wonderful.” It seems that as Participant I experienced a deeper understanding of one’s own faith journey, a greater appreciation for the faith journey of others was felt.

Interpretive Descriptions: Growth and Understanding

- The Examen more deeply connects one with God and one’s own beliefs.
- Greater growth and understanding will be experienced differently amongst practitioners.
- Practicing the Examen aids in showing empathy toward other understandings and practices of faith.

Meaning Units: Simplicity and Do-ability

Textual Descriptions: Simplicity and Do-ability

- Participants found the structure of the Examen to be user-friendly and focused.
- Practicing the Examen helped participants to be open to all parts of one’s life—good and bad.
- The simplicity of the Examen helped participants feel a deeper relationship with God is possible.

Significant Statements: Simplicity and Do-ability

Participant D reflected, “I have no real personal history of a conscious and consistent spiritual exercise or practice. I have tried other things, but they just ebbed and flowed.” Participant E reflected similarly, “I have tried other meditation techniques and prayer practices, but I usually have fallen asleep through the middle of them.” With the Examen, Participant F replied, “The longer I practiced it, the less I had to work at being conscious of doing it.” For them, it seems practicing the Examen was a different experience than other spiritual practices tried before.

Participants also saw structure to the Examen—it was not an exercise where anything goes—but the structure did not seem to be a hindrance. Participant E said, “The structure of the Examen helped keep my mind focused. It was helpful and beneficial. Further explaining, Participant E wrote, “I enjoyed the structure—it was simple and seemingly passive but also active.” Structure was helpful to Participant G, who wrote, “Lack of structure leads to nothing happening.” Participant I also reflected, “The Examen questions were very succinct.”

The Examen is a practice participants felt able to do. Participant G wrote, “The Examen is assessable” and wrote, “It is not so intellectually out there that it cannot be grasped.” Participant I, having participated in many other study groups, wrote, “The Examen is not a big Bible study, but it does bring peace.” Participant I also said, “The Examen helped me look at each day and see where God was—good and bad” and then stated further, “I have started back with the Examen after Lent.”

Interpretive Descriptions: Simplicity and Do-ability

- The Examen is a practice that does not require advanced theological training and affirms that all are able to encounter and experience God.
- The Examen provides a framework but also welcomes and encourages flexibility.
- The simplicity of the Examen can encourage regular practice or at least a desire to return to it at a set aside time.

Meaning Unit: Hopeful and Joyful

Textural Descriptions: Hopeful and Joyful

- A deeper sense of joy was an overwhelming result for many participants.
- Participants experienced the Examen as a practice that gave voice to all parts of their day—good or bad.
- It was possible for participants to live in the darker parts of their day and remain hopeful that there is more to come.

Significant Statements: Hopeful and Joyful

Feelings of gratitude, joy, and hope were experienced by participants. Often, it seems these emotions or feelings were experienced surprisingly because they arose from what appeared to be ordinary parts of their lives. Participant G wrote that the Examen “helped me find good in my day” and that, “It helped me slow down and really enjoy my days.” By living into the joyful moments, time and energy, as G states, were not given to other things: “I found myself giving more thanks and less time nit-picking.” Because of this, G wrote, “I realize I was spending more time in praise and gratitude than in frustration.”

Participants reveal as well, though, that practicing the Examen is not built around only seeing the good and ignoring what is unpleasant. It seems the participants were able to reflect upon even unpleasant moments from a different perspective. Participant A explained, “I am seeing the abuse of the world, and it sucks the joy out of me.” Participant H reflected upon a changing perspective when things did not go as planned: “I am more grateful in the ‘no’ moments.” With all the many experiences that take place in a day, Participant F shared a lasting lesson: “I have found myself to be more hopeful and embracing of each day.”

Participant I reflected, “I am overwhelmed with a sense of sadness and expectation like the disciples must have felt as they abandoned Jesus on the last night of freedom, and I feel awed.” Living into this experience on Maundy Thursday, Participant I also said, “I feel despair on this night but also joy and thankfulness that the story ends with Easter.” While practicing the Examen, Participant G lived through some challenging family situations but also wrote, “The major lesson I learned every day is that God is in control.” Further reflecting upon a particular moment in this family struggle, Participant G wrote, “This moment was a very special moment when I felt the presence of Christ in a powerful way.” In the final interview, when reflecting upon the overall experience with the Examen, Participant I said of it all, “There is great joy to think that all experiences in life could help change our lives.”

Interpretive Descriptions: Hopeful and Joyful

- The joy arising from practicing the Examen is often the result not of some “mountain top” experience, but rather by taking notice of the often mundane aspects of a normal routine.

- The Examen normalizes the movement through a wide spectrum of emotions because nothing in life is believed to be outside the realm of where God can be encountered.

Meaning Unit: Active and Participation

Textual Descriptions: Active and Participation

- Participants experienced God as a dynamic being, desiring of engaging in relationship.
- Being in relationship with God is not passive—participants felt a need to respond with some kind of participation.

Significant Statements: Active and Participation

Participants were able to name how they experienced a sense of change in their relationship with God while practicing the Examen. When thinking about prayer and engaging God, Participant A said, “I used to wait for answers.” Now, A states, “I am talking to God more and asking questions.” This engagement with God led A to say, “It often seems God has simply turned his back, although I realize that he is waiting for me to do something.” Participant I reflected, “God felt tangible—not just somewhere out there.” Participant I, then, stated, “God is active, and I want others to see it.”

One’s relationship with God does not remain static, as participants shared. The Examen, as Participant F shared, “helped me see the nature of God and how my understanding of that has changed.” Using the Examen alongside Scripture reading, F said, “It helps me wonder, ‘Why does Jesus say that or show us this?’ There is an increased capacity to wonder about God and what that might mean for life. Greater wonder at God’s activity also inspired a call to action on the part of participants.

Participant A stated, “The process of writing in the Examen has provided some impetus for moving forward.”

Interpretive Descriptions: Active and Participation

- Experiencing God as active and not remote results from practicing the Examen.
- Because God is understood as active, participants should come to understand their response as active and not passive.

Meaning Unit: Challenging and Requires Effort

Textual Descriptions: Challenging and Requires Effort

- A relationship with God and relationship with a church (organized religion), though related, is not synonymous. As such, participants had to struggle with what this meant for them.
- Though the Examen is simple, participants learned continual practice requires conscious effort.

Significant Statements: Challenging and Requires Effort

This Meaning Unit speaks to some of the challenges that came with practicing the Examen and, perhaps, the challenges that arise when adopting any spiritual practice. This project came during a challenging time in life for Participant B. Recognizing this, B spoke of the relationship between God, spiritual practices, and church: “I needed to reconnect, but I did not really want a formal relationship with the church—including adopting a Lenten practice.”

One participant reflected upon the Examen saying, “To be completely honest—it has been harder than I expected as a daily exercise.” Though the practice was

challenging, Participant B spoke of wanting to continue but also saying, “I need to do it beyond wanting to do it. Feelings are not always reliable.” Encouraging growth in someone else oftentimes seems easier than working toward growth in one’s own life. Participant G wrote, “I am not a big sit down and contemplate kind of person. It can be hard for me to meditate and stay focused.” Participant B said, “Encouraging growth for others seems to require little effort. However, growth for myself, for some reason is a lot more work.” Another participant wrote, “Most days felt mundane. There wasn’t any big shining moments.” Participants grasped that practicing the Examen would take conscious work.

Interpretive Descriptions: Challenging and Requires Effort

- Though it could, the affect of the Examen upon one’s life may not necessarily translate into an increase of church attendance or other spiritual activities.
- Continuing with the Examen or another spiritual practice, though beginning with a strong desire, will require concerted and conscious effort to continue.

A Composite Description of the Lived Experience of Practicing the Ignatian Examen

The Ignatian Examen is a spiritual practice that can be practiced anywhere someone is able to reflect for a moment. While the practice of the Examen is flexible enough to be done anywhere, often the experience is enriched by returning to a consistent space and time. The Ignatian Examen is a practice that, though needing some basic instruction and formation, is flexible and simple enough for many to find doable. Some basic orientation about Ignatian Spirituality is helpful, but practicing the Examen does not require advanced theological training.

The experience of the Ignatian Examen is built upon awareness of those moments that brought joy in life but also of those moments when joy was absent. Often, the joy can be surprising, because it does not often result from significant experiences. Rather, the joy comes from a closer look at the regular, even routine, parts of one's day—activities, encounters, experiences, etc. Experiencing joy, though, is not accomplished by ignoring anything unpleasant. All parts of life—good or bad, sad or joyful—are seen and understood as places where God's grace can be experienced.

Participants who practiced the Ignatian Examen experienced God, not as a distant being, but as one who is close and active. The experience of an active God has often led participants to feel inspired to be more active in their relationships and activities. The experience of God, through the Ignatian Examen, has revealed God to be bigger than any one experience or understanding. While participants will often experience God through regular practices, such as church attendance, those practices are not believed to be the only and exhaustive places where God is experienced.

In part, because the Ignatian Examen holds up the possibility of experiencing God in all things, it is understood that the Examen might not be the chosen practice for all. Some have found it necessary to practice the Examen on an on-going pattern, while others find it better to practice the Examen at set times throughout the year, desiring to return to it with fresh eyes. While practicing the Ignatian Examen every day might be unrealistic for some, it is a practice that, when presented with some basic instruction, is helpful to foster a deeper experience of God, faith, and/or life.

Chapter Five

LESSONS LEARNED AND FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

Many participants at St. Paul's wrote of how practicing gratitude became a sustaining practice throughout their day. Participants wrote, almost surprised, of how much they had to be thankful for and how they felt when spending more time in gratitude.

The gratitude that participants felt came as they journeyed through the ordinary parts of their days. The Examen helped them see God in their lives. Though the participants did not speak much with each other during the act of ministry, it seemed as though many could have been talking and listening to each other throughout. There were common themes which emerged for many. This helped affirm for me what I was hoping for in the experiences of participants, and it also affirmed what I have experienced in my own life.

Listening to others about their faith journey has not only encouraged me but also expanded my own understanding of faith. Listening, for me, entails the belief that there is always something else to learn. Richard Osmer has been helpful in explaining what priestly listening entails and why it is absolutely necessary. He writes, "Priestly listening is, first and foremost, an activity of the entire Christian community, not just its leaders. It reflects the nature of the congregation as a fellowship in which people listen to one another as a form of mutual support, care and edification."¹

¹ Osmer, *Practical*, 35.

Because I believe myself to be a pilgrim, the lessons learned from this thesis project are offered up humbly and held with open hands. The lessons may very well help others, but I do not believe I have arrived at the final answer on spiritual practices or found the solution that will solve the problems of trying to live as a Christian in a post-Christendom world. I will begin with lessons I have learned from using hermeneutic phenomenology as my qualitative research method and why growing as a practitioner might be helpful in priestly ministry. From there, I will offer up lessons learned from sociology, Ignatian Spirituality, the Examen and then finally some future possibilities for study and use of the Ignatian Examen.

Lessons from Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Asking a thesis question has meant I needed to consciously listen to what participants were saying, whether in print or voice. I needed to use a research methodology that would aid in the listening process but also claim not to have made the final and definitive statement for all time.

Hermeneutic Phenomenology required gathering data in field texts and living with that data. This meant reading the field texts multiple times. As the lived experience descriptions were being returned, I read with the intention of hearing what the participant was saying. The interview manuscripts functioned in the same way. By far the greatest amount of time in research was spent in simply living with the data—reading and reflecting. This was formal attending as I worked through this project, but as Osmer described, it was priestly listening because the participants are also parishioners, whose words gave me a deeper understanding of who they are and how faith influences their lives.

I also learned that as I lived with and reflected upon the field texts, there was not a way I could properly do the phenomenological analysis without spending significant time reading and reflecting. I could not rush the process. In much the same way, I have been reminded that pastoral ministry, at least for me, means I have to stay connected to the people I serve. Connection with and living amongst parishioners is not just another task in pastoral ministry but is at the very heart of it. I believe those who participated did so because of the pastoral relationship of trust already established and they wanted to help me out in this project. The work done together, I believe, strengthened those relationships.

The process of bracketing was very helpful to me. As a priest and practitioner of the Examen myself, I came with my own experiences, feelings, and opinions. Because the Examen has been helpful to me, I had to name my hope that the Examen would be helpful for others. As a priest at St. Paul's, I have my own understanding of the social context, the challenges faced in the past, and what, I believe, St. Paul's must do in the future. Those thoughts and opinions are not shared by everyone, so bracketing is important because I am not a disinterested party. I care about the participants as parishioners. I know how the Examen has helped me, and I have an understanding of what I believe life and ministry at St. Paul's must look like in a post-Christendom society.

Writing the chapters on sociology and theology were an opportunity for me to state what I think and believe and then bracket them as the phenomenological analysis continued. Creswell and van Manen have been helpful in explaining bracketing not as a complete setting aside but as a suspension. The concept of suspension has been helpful

because it means awareness. I, as a practitioner of phenomenology, cannot do the necessary work in analysis if I am not aware of my biases. Knowing myself better has helped me to better listen to those I serve as priest.

Another lesson from hermeneutic phenomenology arose in the process of writing a composite description. Interpreting and writing does not mean one is writing the final and exhaustive explanation of the phenomenon. As I wrote the composite description, I did so knowing that I was offering my best understanding of what had been said to me, yet, someone else reading and listening to the same data might write something different. There seems to be a humility built into phenomenology. People write and speak from their own experience, not assuming their experience as the sum total of all experiences. In this way, hermeneutic phenomenology could be a valuable research method in the practice of ministry.

Lessons from Sociology

Chapter Two began with a quote from Charles Taylor concerning secularism. The word “secular,” according to Taylor is multi-layered. The United States is a country with many different contexts in which secular means different things.

The culture in Texas, I believe, can be understood as secular but the secularity in Texas is different from other contexts in the United States. I argued in Chapter Two that Taylor’s second definition, “the falling off of religious practices,” most accurately describes the social context in Texas. There is still social esteem in belonging to a faith community. Waco is a city in which it might be assumed that many people belong to a faith community. Statistics showed that though the importance of faith in God remains

high in Texas, actual practices—attendance, formation, prayer—are declining. Believing in God is still thought a good thing, but at the same time, that relationship does not appear to affect regular practices.

As I looked at statistics, it became clearer to me that a major problem throughout the United States was a decline in connection. It is not just religious communities who have witnessed a decline in attendance and participation. As a priest, I believe it is necessary for people to participate in a faith community. However, I have had to reflect intently upon why I believe it is a good thing. At the heart of Christianity is being in relationship with God and because of that primary relationship, our other relationships in life are, we hope, positively affected. If relationship with God heals brokenness, then as one's relationship with God is healed, what does healing look like in our connections with others? Actively connecting with God and others seems to be declining. What impact does this have, not only on a church but also on the wider social context?

I believe there are differences between a church and other civic organizations—purpose for existence and empowerment by the Holy Spirit to name only two—but there are many similarities as well. Each Sunday in which the Eucharist is celebrated, there is a reaffirmation of being created to be in relationship with God and one other. Not only are these relationships good, they are believed to be necessary to live a full life. If we need God and one other, what do we do if we are not regularly around God and others in meaningful ways? As I reflected upon sociological trends, as a priest, I am concerned with what a decrease in church attendance means. My concern, though, is not for attendance numbers as an end in themselves but rather how meaningful connections to

God and others are being made. In other words, how is the abundant life of Jesus Christ being experienced if religious practices are declining?

Lessons from Ignatian Spirituality and the Examen

Ignatius of Loyola was a person who lived centuries ago, and yet the way he understood and practiced his faith is still meaningful to many today. One of the most helpful things, I believe, about Ignatian Spirituality is its embedded flexibility and creativity.

The flexibility and adaptability in Ignatian Spirituality helps make it particularly helpful for grasping how one might understand a relationship with God and then living a life shaped by that relationship. Key to this understanding is remembering that being influenced by Ignatian Spirituality does not mean an exact one-to-one carry-over of how Ignatius himself or how Jesuits have lived through the years.

Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert's work offers helpful examples of translating Ignatian Spirituality into the different contexts of the twenty-first century. In their book, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed*, the authors show how the Spiritual Exercises can still be meaningful but must be translated into other contexts. This has been helpful in thinking about the larger context of Ignatian Spirituality.

This kind of conscious reflection and translation is not only evident in the history of Ignatian Spirituality but also welcomed and affirmed. Believing that God can be found in all things and that we should be contemplative in action means that as each person journeys through life, the lessons learned and graces experienced will look and sound different person to person, yet should be celebrated.

The Ignatian Examen has a basic structure but it is also flexible, encouraging adaptability. The Ignatian Examen affirms the flexibility and adaptability seen in Ignatian Spirituality. If God desires to be in relationship with all, then the creativity allowed for in Ignatian Spirituality is celebrated because the God who loves us all is a creative God—at least I believe Ignatius of Loyola would say so.

Possibilities for the Wider Church

This thesis project has been built around praying the Ignatian Examen, a specific spiritual practice. It has, however, caused me to reflect further upon why spiritual practices are so necessary for the future.

The Examen will continue to be a regular part of my own life. I can imagine encouraging others to use the Examen regularly where I serve, especially around moments where communal discernment is needed. The Examen could help a community become aware of where God is in their own life but also where we, as a faith community, encounter God in our life as community. The Examen could also be very helpful when a faith community is going through a particularly difficult period. Experiencing joy would not come because the community was ignoring the trauma, tragedy, or heartache. Rather, the Examen could help the community see that there is more than just the difficulty in front of them.

The Examen, along with other spiritual practices, could be helpful for the wider church by understanding why spiritual practices are important as relationships with God begin and deepen. For many years, church attendance perhaps held an unrivaled place among spiritual practices—one only needed to attend and a relationship with God was

alright. As church leaders, we need to become more explicit about the motivation behind practices. For example—Why should one come to church? Why should one adopt a prayer practice? Why should one give?

As I continue to learn about my own faith journey and those of the participants, praying the Examen helped them in their relationship with God and opened up new possibilities in their relationships with others. The need for church attendance does not have to decline but it could possibly be rethought. Instead of thinking of church as the destination and all is taken care of, a local faith community could begin to be understand itself more as a mission resource and recharging station. We must gather to experience healing with God and others, receive the necessary resources for mission, and then understand our task to go out and make witness of a life-giving relationship with Jesus Christ.

Possibilities for Further Study

Though this chapter is devoted to reviewing what has already been said, there is room inside a phenomenological study to wonder about an ongoing dialogue. Mark Vagle helps explain:

Another way to think about this is to imagine that we are entering into and moving through a “dialogue with” the phenomenon we are studying. This dialogue is both literal and figurative. It is literal in that we may craft phenomenological research designs that explicitly involve dialogues with others about their experiences of the phenomenon. It is figurative in that our interpretations, growing understandings, theorizing and debating are dialogic, that is, they are moving and shifting through the questions we pose, observations we make, and assertions we proffer.²

² Vagle, *Crafting*, 42.

With Vagle's words in mind, this section raises possibilities of where further dialogue and learning might take place. It introduces possible points of contact for further study which go beyond this particular phenomenological study.

Further study could take place around how and if practicing the Ignatian Examen affects connection with others. As I understand what is happening in a post-Christendom world, a major challenge is the decline in meaningful connection as seen in the building of social capital. How is connection strengthened by our practices?

Social capital is built when meaningful and ongoing connection takes place between people. This certainly can take place at church but church is not the only place meaningful connection is made. It could be fruitful to study how practicing the Ignatian Examen as a community might help foster a deep relationship with God and deepen connection with others.

Another place for future work could be around how might practicing the Examen helps embed necessary capacities for creativity and flexibility. Bishop Andy Doyle writes:

The age of the machine and cookie cutter Christians is over, except the Church has not figured that out yet...In order to be the future Church we must be awake to the reality of a world filled with self-learners, storytellers, and people making their self-directed way. Today we are moving into a new creative era where we remember an ancient truth—God is weaving a beautiful tapestry of stories in and amongst us.³

The presence of flexibility and creativity, for Bishop Doyle and others, should not only be acknowledged but affirmed when thinking about what it means to be the Church

³ C. Andrew Doyle, *Church: A Generous Community Amplified for the Future* (Alexandria, VA: VTS Press, 2015), 286.

in a post-Christendom culture. Drawing upon the example of Lewis and Clark, Tod Bolsinger talks about the absolute need for creativity and a willingness to go in uncharted directions. He writes further:

From Lewis and Clark we learn that if we can adapt and adventure, we can thrive. That leadership in uncharted territory requires both learning and loss, once we realize that the losses won't kill us, they can teach us. And mostly, we will learn that to thrive off the map in an exciting and rapidly changing world means learning to let go, learn as we go and keep going no matter what.⁴

The Ignatian Examen is a practice particularly equipped to help one see how God is working in each of us and in the church. Finding God in all things begins to happen for the practitioner, but also as one connects and talks with others, they can see that happening for each other. How God is present looks different, yet it is believed that God is present. The power of connection could show how our different stories enrich us.⁵

Thinking of the relationship between the Examen and practice of evangelism could also provide fruitful reflection for the future. Ignatius in his autobiography referred to himself as a pilgrim. The Spiritual Exercises were practices helpful to him and he passed them on to others who might find them helpful as well. Ignatian Spirituality does not believe it is the final answer on God or being in relationship with God. Finding God in all things means the opportunities for encountering God are limitless. If this could be true for one person, it could be true for another. Conversation and listening to others

⁴ Bolsinger, *Canoeing*, 14.

⁵ My own curiosity about the role of joy affecting one's life helps me wonder what connection there might be between practicing the Examen, or other disciplines and what is being learned in neuroscience. Though not always explicitly Christian, much in neuroscience seems to be revealing the conscious role humans can have in the shaping of their own brain. One such resource to begin the conversation is: Rick Hanson, *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence* (New York, NY: Harmony Books, 2013).

would help show how this is possible. The practice of listening would not be in addition to evangelism but embedded in it. David Gortner helps explain:

Developing awareness begins with curiosity about the people around us—both in our individual lives and in our shared congregational life...As we become more practiced in our everyday lives, we will encounter other people differently—and begin to notice more acutely our own internal barriers in interacting with people who are not like us. Thus, the next step in effective evangelism is learning to listen. “Evangelistic listening” is deep and respectful listening to the life stories of others and seeking out signs of the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.⁶

The Examen is a tool that could aid this kind of listening. As we become more aware of God’s presence in our own life, we understand that someone else can encounter God in his or hers. Listening to God and others, then, is not another task to get around to if there is time. Rather, one comes closer to God and others when practicing deep listening.

Conclusion

The Ignatian Examen is a spiritual practice that has been deeply meaningful to me and many others. It is a simple prayer that helps the practitioner develop a greater awareness of God’s presence and activity. Most of the time, this awareness of God’s presence takes place in the routine and mundane parts of life. Developing greater awareness can lead to practicing gratitude for all that God has done.

Ignatian Spirituality is built upon the concepts of finding God in all things and being contemplative in action. The Examen is a practice that will not appeal to all. This, however, does not diminish the impact the Examen can have. Instead of believing all must pray the Examen, as if it was the only valid spiritual practice, Ignatius would have

⁶ David Gortner, *Transforming Evangelism* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2008), 132-133

us believe that we should be aware of God's presence in our own lives and also in others, but in a way that makes sense for each person.

My hope was that the participants in this project would be enriched in their relationship with God. I believe they experienced the Examen as a helpful tool in their relationship with God and were enriched as their relationship deepened. Whether it be through an ongoing practice of the Examen or some other practice, I hope others will experience a life-giving relationship with God. Friendship with God is the goal. If praying the Examen helps, by all means continue to do so. Whatever practice one may use though, I pray we do so for the greater glory of God.

Appendix A

Participant Letter

Greetings,

As I have shared with many, I am currently enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program at Virginia Theological Seminary. I am now at the point in the process when I am engaging in the work of my Thesis Project (TP), which will be a study of the experience of practicing the Ignatian Examen. During the season of Lent 2019, I will be inviting participants to regularly practice the Examen as part of their Lenten discipline. The study includes writing a lived experience description about a specific experience practicing the Examen mid-Lent and then all participants to be interviewed about their overall experience after Lent. This letter is an invitation to you to participate in my Thesis Project study. If you agree, you will be given directions as to how to practice the Examen and write a lived experience description.

All participants will be invited to participate in the interview segment of the study. Those interviews will be conducted by myself and will be digitally recorded. You will be asked questions regarding such things as your experience of a sense of connection to God, your spirituality, and the things that matter most to you in life. The interviews will take approximately 30 minutes to complete and will be conducted in your home or at St. Paul's. The information you share during the interviews will remain confidential. Comments that you make may be anonymously quoted in the final written thesis and in other material that may result from the study. Common themes that emerge from the study may be explored in other elements of my ongoing work as a researcher.

As a priest in this day and age with a passion for faith development, I struggle with how to faithfully foster connection and relationship with God. This Thesis Project is designed to help me and others committed to Christian formation be more aware of how we ourselves connect with God and how a sense of connection might be available for others. There can be many ways a person encounters God and learning to be mindful of those encounters can deepen one's life of faith.

Participation in the project, writing, or interview element of the study is strictly voluntary but does require the consent of each participant. As well, if you choose to participate, you only have to respond to those questions that you want to answer. If you prefer not to participate in the study, that is fine and I am grateful that you gave it your thoughtful consideration. If you have any questions or comments, please do not hesitate to contact me by email.

Faithfully,

The Rev. James M. Pevehouse, Senior Associate Rector

Appendix B

Ignatian Formation Outlines

St. Ignatius of Loyola: An Introduction

- He was born in 1491 in the Basque region in Northern Spain.
- “Up to his twenty-sixth year he was a man given to worldly vanities, and having a vain and overpowering desire to gain renown, he found special delight in the exercise arms” (A Pilgrim’s Journey, 37).
- During a battle in Pamplona in 1521, his leg was hit and shattered by a cannonball. Painful recuperation followed. Due to wanting to still look good in fashionable tights, he underwent many painful operations. He would walk with a limp for the rest of his life.
- He convalesced at the family home in Loyola. His hope was to spend the time reading books of chivalry and of knights, whose deeds impressed women.
- Only two books were available—one on the life of Christ and another on the lives of saints. Upon reading about Francis of Assisi and Dominic, he felt he could live the kind of lives they lived. More importantly, he began to feel that he wanted to do so.
- When daydreaming about the saints he felt excited and full of energy. Daydreaming about knights left him feeling dry and uninspired. Thoughts, emotions, and feelings became a significant part of how he understood and discerned God’s will.
- Ignatius gave himself over, almost obsessively, to emulating the lives of the saints. This experience actually led to great despair—there was so much “work” to do. How could he ever think about fully following Jesus for the rest of his life?
- Ignatius began to moderate some of his excessive practices. A helpful image of God, for him, was one of a schoolmaster teaching a young child. His relationship with God began to deepen. Many of the ideas he found helpful in his own life would soon be collected in *The Spiritual Exercises*. This book has become one of the most well-known and read in Christianity.
- He began to discern that he could best serve the Church as a priest. His theological studies eventually lead him to the University of Paris. While in Paris, Ignatius and a group of friends began building a deep friendship—one of the friends was Francis Xavier.
- This group of friends bonded together and soon formed what would be officially recognized in 1540 as the Society of Jesus, or Jesuits. Ignatius became the first Superior General and served until his death in 1556.
- Ignatius of Loyola was canonized in 1622. His feast day is July 31.
- Ignatian Spirituality:
 - Finding God in all things

- Becoming contemplative in action
- Looking at the world in an incarnational way
- Seeking freedom and detachment

Ignatian Spirituality: An Introduction

- *Finding God in all things*

It means that nothing is considered outside the purview of the spiritual life. Ignatian Spirituality is not confined within the walls of a church. It is not a spirituality that considers only “religious” topics, like prayer and sacred texts, as part of a person’s spiritual life...Ignatian Spirituality considers everything an important element of your life. That includes religious services, sacred Scriptures, prayer, and charitable works, to be sure, but it also includes friends, family, work, relationships, sex, suffering, and joy, as well as nature, music, and pop culture. (The Jesuit Guide to (almost) everything, 5)

- *Becoming contemplative in action*

Most of us lead busy lives with little time for prayer and meditation. But by being aware of the world around us—in the midst of our activity—we can allow a contemplative stance to inform our actions. Instead of seeing the spiritual life as one that can exist only if it is enclosed by the walls of a monastery, Ignatius asks you to see the world as your monastery. (The Jesuit Guide to (almost) everything, 8)

- *Looking at the world in an incarnational way*

Christian theology holds that God became human, or incarnate, in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. More broadly, an incarnational spirituality means believing that God can be found in the everyday events of our lives. God is not just out there. God is right here, too. (The Jesuit Guide to (almost) everything, 8)

- *Seeking freedom and detachment*

Ignatius was acutely aware of what kept him, and others, from leading a life of freedom and joy...When Ignatius says that we should be “detached,” he’s talking about not being tied down by unimportant things...Ignatius counseled people to avoid disordered affections (disordered because it’s not ordered to something life-giving). They block the path to detachment, to growing more in freedom, growing as a person, and growing closer to God. (The Jesuit Guide to (almost) everything, 9, 10)

The Ignatian Examen: An Introduction

- The *Examen* is a prayer focused on God's presence in the real world. It looked to a God who was near to me, present in my world, and active in my life. It told me to approach prayer with gratitude, not guilt. It helped me find God in my life as I lived it, not in some heavenly realm beyond space and time. The Examen had me take myself seriously, as I was, not as I wished I was or thought I could be someday if I worked hard enough. (A Simple Life-Changing Prayer, preface)
- Nothing in our lives is so insignificant that it doesn't deserve God's attention. In fact, the mundane and the humdrum parts of our lives give depth and texture to our relationship with God. Washing the windows and cooking dinner are as much a part of the relationship as graduation day. If it's part of our human experience, God is in it. (A Simple Life-Changing Prayer, 6-7)
- My faith tells me that God is everywhere at all times, and that Christ is in my heart and embedded in all of creation—regardless of how conscious I am of his presence at any given moment. That's wonderfully consoling, but I want more! I want to *feel* his presence all the time. I want to feel him not only when I leave the nitty-gritty of my life and go to church; I want to feel his presence always! And I want to share with him even the smallest details of my life: the irritating e-mail I just received and the pleasant smile of the woman at the post office; the dread in my heart for the difficult meeting I'm about to step into and also the delight of biting into that perfectly sweet and crunchy apple during my break. I want to talk to Christ about the stupid thing I just said to my boss and also the little victory I had in getting that boring multiday task completed. Sure I want to share with Christ the really big things: my grave sins and my overwhelming consolations, and I will share those big things during my daily meditation and when I go to Mass or confession. But the closer I grow to Christ, the more I want to share with him the seemingly insignificant things as well. I know that he's there, in the midst of it all, and I long to tap into his presence right there in the mud and muck, the pencils and French fries of my complicated yet incredibly ordinary life. (Reimagining the Ignatian Examen, vii-viii)

How to do the Examen

- Set a timer for no more than 15 minutes (the Examen is intended to be a short, focused prayer).
- Begin and end with a familiar pattern or ritual (i.e. breathe in and out four to five times or make the sign of the cross or say the Lord's Prayer).
- Ask for God's grace to reflect honestly on your day.
- Replay the day—Where did I encounter God today? What gave me joy today? Give thanks for all those moments—regardless of being big or small.
- Replay the day—Where did God seem absent? How did I fall short or When was there a lack of joy? Repent of any mistakes or failures.
- If so moved, make 1 to 2 concrete resolutions for the next day.

Appendix C

Instructions for Writing a Lived Experience Description

Writing a LED (Lived Experience Description)

Borrowed and adapted from Max Van Manen: www.maxvanmanen.com/files/2014/03/LED.pdf
and

Mark D. Vagel: *Crafting Phenomenological Research. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016.*

Describe a specific time of praying the Ignatian Examen as much as possible in concrete personal terms. Try to give a description of the experience as you live through it. Avoid as much as possible introductions, rationalizations, causal explanations, generalizations, or interpretations. In other words, the point is not to beautify your account but rather to render a vivid description of time you prayed the Examen. The goal is to think about a specific moment. You can chose a “run of the mill” experience; it does not have to be a “breakthrough” experience.

If possible, keep to a single page or a page and a half (Not more than 2 pages).

- Describe what you thought, what you felt, what captured your attention, etc.
- Try to describe the experience like you were watching it on film.
- Think about the event chronologically.
- Describe the event as you lived through it. Try to avoid causal explanations (this happened because....), generalizations (this typically happens early in the morning), or abstract interpretations (I wonder if...).
- Try to focus on an example of praying the Examen that stands out, in your memory, for its vividness or as it happened.
- Try to think of a particular time of prayer—perhaps the first or last time you prayed the Examen.
- It is a personal account.
- Sometimes recalling in the present tense may provide for a more vivid account than retelling it in the past tense.

Appendix D

Final Interview Questions

1. How did this exercise help you, or not, feel connected to God?
2. You wrote of one experience. Is there another you could tell me about?
3. Overall, tell me about your experience with the Ignatian Examen?
4. Could you imagine using the Examen again?

Appendix E

Field Text Significant Statements

I am talking to God more and asking questions.

I used to wait for answers.

I am seeing the abuse of the world and it sucks the joy out of me.

I have an office space...and it is nice to do the Examen in that space.

I started to feel God's presence in the surrounding everything.

It often seems God has simply turned his back, although I realize now that he is waiting for me to do something.

The process of writing this down has provided some impetus for moving forward.

Needed to reconnect but did not really want a formal relationship with the church—including a Lenten discipline.

When I did the Examen, I needed to do it in ways that gave room for preparation.

Spirituality with God needs the right physical context.

I need to do it beyond wanting to do it. Feelings are not always reliable.

One thing that has been made clear through this experience, is how much I need a regular set aside everyday time for this.

To be completely honest, it has been harder than I expected as a daily exercise.

Doing that for others seem to require little effort. However, doing it for myself for some reason is a lot more work.

Crusty Texan...his faith looks different from mine but we both believed.

Spending time at the arboretum—just sat there and became part of the moment. Breathing and taking it all in.

Opportunity to stop for an assigned time and ponder our connectedness.

Doing this project helped me to feel more of a personal connection to God and my beliefs.

I have a better sense and definition of faith.

Awareness of something beyond helps in managing the temporary nature of our daily lives.

Helped me look harder at my day and be more aware.

Longer I practiced it, the less I had to work at being conscious of doing it.

Mindfulness is being built in. Mindfulness, instead of using a check-off list is more important.

I am more grateful in the “no” moments.

No real history of a conscious and consistent spiritual exercise of discipline. I have done different things which ebbed and flowed.

I was more attuned with how I passed people in the hallway and not just rushing by them.

I have become more aware of others.

It made more introspective and externally aware of what was happening around me.

I believe the Examen has caused me to be more steady, present-minded, and more focused on personal growth and learning.

It helped me find good in my day.

I found myself giving more thanks and less time nit-picking.

It helped me slow down and really enjoy my days.

This was a nice discipline that drew me closer to God.

I realize I was spending more time in praise and gratitude than in frustration.

I have found myself to be more hopeful and embracing of each day’s surprises.

I began noticing God more in the small, beautiful details.

This project forced me to slow down and not be so busy.

The Examen helped me connect to the nature of who God has been.

Helped me see the nature of God and how that has changed for me.

I enjoyed the structure: simple but both passive and active.

The structure of the Examen helped keep my mind focused. It was helpful and beneficial.

I have become more introspective than I was before because of the Examen.

God has used the Examen to cause me to be more thoughtful about my own actions and more carefully explore my own motivations for the way I live my life.

Began to feel like it was becoming a part of me.

Can do it on my own. I feel more comfortable doing it on my own.

Lack of structure leads to nothing happening.

The Examen is assessable.

Not so intellectually out there that it cannot be grasped.

The major lesson I relearn every day is that God is in control.

That was a very special moment when I felt the presence of Christ in a powerful way.

The Examen questions were very succinct.

The Examen helped me look at each day and see where God was—good and bad.

God felt tangible—not just somewhere out there.

Joy to think that all experiences could help change our lives.

This is not a big bible study but it does bring peace.

God is active and I want others to see it.

I have started back with the Examen after Lent.

I am overwhelmed with a sense of sadness an expectation like the disciples must have felt as they abandoned Jesus on the last night of freedom and I feel awed.

I feel despair, joy and thankfulness that the story ends with Easter.

I am part of Bible Study Fellowship. It is has a conservative theology but the recent study of John was wonderful.

I am not a big sit down and contemplate kind of person. It can be hard for me to meditate and stay focused.

Most days felt mundane. There wasn't any big shining moments.

I did it enough there is a desire it becomes a habit.

This is a learning process and not always an easy one.

I have tried other meditation techniques and prayer practices but I usually fell asleep through the middle of them.

It helps me wonder, Why does Jesus say that or show us this?

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