

Ecumenical Examen as a Tool for Ecological Conversion
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A Theological Response to the Environmental Crisis:

The context of my work in the Ignatian Mentoring Program was the vision of the Theology Department for a renewed THEO 111: Theological Foundations course. Through a collaborative process of discernment and discussion in 2019, the Department articulated 7 student learning outcomes for THEO 111. Among these were the one which is the focus of my project: that students be able to formulate a theologically informed response to the environmental crisis. We collectively agreed that a primary text for this work would be Pope Francis' encyclical *On Care for Our Common Home: Laudato Si'*.

Pope Francis powerfully frames the challenge facing us both as human beings on this planet and as educators in responding to the environmental crisis:

“Many things have to change course, but it is we human beings above all who need to change. We lack an awareness of our common origin, of our mutual belonging, and of a future to be shared with everyone. This basic awareness would enable the development of new convictions, attitudes and forms of life. A great cultural, spiritual and educational challenge stands before us, and it will demand that we set out on the long path of renewal.”¹

This shift in awareness and action constitutes in Pope Francis' words an “ecological conversion” which requires “the recognition of our errors, sins, faults and failures, and leads to heartfelt repentance and desire to change.”² As I reflected on ways in which students might grasp the stakes and dynamics of such a transformation, the Ignatian practice of the Examen presented itself as an effective tool. Indeed, the Society of Jesus has created an Examen, “Reconciling God, Creation, and Humanity,” as a tool “to heed Pope Francis' call in *Laudato Si'* to care for

¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 202 . Available at: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

² *Laudato Si'*, paragraph 218.

creation and to reconcile our relationship with God, creation and one another as expressed in the 36th General Congregation of the Society of Jesus.”³

The pedagogical challenge as I conceived it was how to adapt such an Examen for use with students coming from a variety of faith backgrounds, including those with no religious affiliation, so that each student could engage in a meaningful and authentic manner with the exercise. Theological Foundations is a required course which draws from the entire first-year class and the students in my two courses reflected this diversity. How would I formulate the language of the Examen in a way that was invitational? How would I give students enough familiarity with the practice itself so that they could apply it to the context of their relationship with human and non-human creation?

Formulating an Ecumenical Examen:

In order to give my students the context they needed to understand the Examen as a spiritual practice and to develop an awareness of how such a practice might contribute to the promotion of justice, I introduced the Examen in my first course module on Ignatian spirituality and Jesuit values. I worked closely with my colleague Gillian Ahlgren to formulate the Examen in invitational language, reimagining what it meant to engage in the five steps of gratitude, review, sorrow, forgiveness, and grace. Together we produced a series of reflection questions through which I guided the students in an in-class exercise. Students were asked to reflect and write down their reflections in response to the following prompts:

1. As you think about yesterday, focus on a moment where you felt restored, at peace, joyful, content, or affirmed. Remember and reenter that moment with gratitude.
2. Now go back through the flow of the day, what moments do you notice? Where would you have wanted to spend more time?
3. Is there anything about the flow of the day that you don't like? A moment when you did something you regret or something was done that hurt you? A moment in which you felt limited, disabled, or in need of help?
4. Imagine what that situation might look like with greater compassion or wisdom.
5. Now as we come back to this present moment, allow yourself to reenter this space with more kindness and gratitude.

Students were invited to share their response to the experience with each other in pairs. I then turned the focus of their paired discussion to how this practice of self-examination and reflection might shape our relationships in community.

As students reported back from their paired discussions and we moved to group reflection, we noted that attentiveness to individual experiences of gratitude and regret causes us to pay attention to our relationships with others. This leads us to develop awareness for the way we

³ <http://www.ecologicalexamen.org>

interact, what is broken and needs healing within and around us. I suggested to the students that these person-to-person relationships are the basis for any social change. Through compassion and empathy for individuals we widen out to the larger community of which we are a part, developing a spirit of solidarity in which we share the cares and concerns of those who are more distant from us. As we seek healing and reconciliation for ourselves, we begin to seek it for the community as a whole. Mindfulness of our actions on an individual level enhances mindfulness of our part in the way society functions.

Formulating an Ecological Examen for a Remote Learning Environment:

I planned to return to this understanding of the Examen as a tool for personal reflection towards solidarity and the work of social and ecological justice as the culmination of the course module on the environmental crisis and of our work with *Laudato Si'*. Just before we began this module, Xavier shifted to remote instruction in response to the spread of Covid-19. I had to reassess and restructure my teaching for this new environment while being sensitive to the needs and challenges of a group of students who were now located in diverse time zones and home contexts from the west coast to the east coast of the United States to overseas in Botswana. Through intensive work with Amy Gardner in Instructional Design, I determined that the most sensitive approach would be to focus on designing asynchronous work to be complemented by a limited number of targeted synchronous class sessions. I created multilevel assignments which required students to engage with close reading questions on selected passages from *Laudato Si'* and then to compose discussion posts which analyzed, synthesized, and reflected on their close reading. I was impressed by the sophistication of many of the students' work and the insights my two classes as a whole generated from interacting with their colleagues' posts.

The question I faced in this new context was whether I could guide the students through an Ecological Examen over Zoom as successfully and meaningfully as we had done together in the classroom at the start of the semester. My mentor Lisa Ottum encouraged and supported me in taking this on and offered guidance on using PowerPoint and Canvas to enhance the synchronous experience. She reflected with me on my reformulation of the Society of Jesus' Examen, "Reconciling God, Creation, and Humanity," for use in this context.

As the first module in our new remote learning context, this culminating work with the Examen was the first opportunity students had to engage with each other synchronously. In the spirit of *Cura Personalis*, I dedicated the first half of the class to allowing each student to share how they were adapting to their new environment, what had been most challenging and what had been sustaining them as they were all under stay-at-home orders. I called on the students in order of their online discussion groups so that they could have a stronger sense of the lives of the people they were engaging remotely. The students were open with each other and their shared experiences grounded us for the reflection which followed.

Using PowerPoint with text and images, I then guided them through the following five steps of the Ecological Examen I had reformulated.

1. Think back to a time when you felt joy, wonder, or gratitude for something in the natural world. What was compelling to you about this experience? Why did you feel this way?

2. Where do you see splendor or beauty in the natural and human environment? Where do you see suffering and environmental injustice?
3. How do your life choices impact the natural and human environment?
4. What troubles you about your engagement with the natural and human environment? What do you regret or wish you could change about your impact on the environment?
5. In what ways might you change your ways of engaging with the environment? How might you contribute to the protection and flourishing of the natural and human environment?

After sharing our reflections as a group, in the spirit of the final step of transformation, we shifted to considering the inspiring work of youth activists for ecological justice, including Greta Thunberg and Xiuhtezcatl Martinez, one of the plaintiffs in *Juliana v. United States*.

Student Reflections

Students wrote their responses to the experience in an ungraded reflective writing assignment on Canvas. I was gratified to find that the experience of engaging in the Ecological Examen as a class had meaning to them, even in the context of the mediation of the online platform. The following is a selection of their reflections.

“For me the most meaningful thing about being able to take part in the Ecological Examen online is that we were still able to take a silent moment to reflect on these issues even though everyone is social distancing at the moment. I think that throughout the reflection I kept thinking about how important it is to keep these thoughts of wanting to help climate change even when we are allowed to go back into the world again. As well as how changing habits today and making sure to vote people in whose views reflect yours when voting season comes back is just as important.”

“Being able to engage with the class and hear how everyone is doing was a nice change of pace. The examen made me reflect on how grateful I am for my first year at Xavier. I am so grateful for the people I have met and the opportunities I had. I'm already counting down the days until we are back on campus. I see beauty in traveling and exploring the world. I see it at the ocean and in the mountains. I see beauty in the people I meet and in my family. There's so much beauty in the world and at a time like this we really have to look to find things to keep us happy. As a college student we are the future and we are in charge of making decisions that affect us and our future generations. I think we have to remember that even if we live in a place where we don't see an environmental crisis we need to realize its everywhere and our everyday choices effect the environment. I can limit my use of single use plastic and limit my pollution by carpooling or biking/walking. Little choices like this can make a large difference in the long run. Overall, I really enjoyed the exercise and it was great getting to see our class is healthy.”

“I think engaging in the Ecological Examen on a class online made it more meaningful than if I were to do it myself. I think if I were to have done it by myself, I would have found myself just reading it rather than reading then reflecting. While doing the exercise, a common insight I had was that if everyone changed just a little aspect of their lives, it could make such a difference in the world and what was once destroyed or polluted, could become beautiful again.”

“The Ecological Examen afforded me a self-reflective view of my actions against the environment I had never really concentrated on before. I couldn't stop thinking about every time I bought a disposable plastic bottle from the vending machines in my dorm. I do end up recycling them, but it's better to have never used them in the first place. The last slide also made me reflect on the impersonal actions I could take to work towards alleviating climate change. Social change and public demonstration will always be more effective than personal changes to my lifestyle, so I considered getting more involved and searching for groups taking action against environmental deterioration in my communities.”

“I really liked the first part of the Ecological Examen where it made me think of a time when I felt joy, wonder, or gratitude in the natural world. The first instance that came to mind was when my roommate and I went to a state park a couple miles out of Cincinnati. The other instance was when I went walking in a park back home with another friend over Spring Break. I think both of these times brought so much joy to me because I was with people I loved so much. It is definitely hard being back home, but remembering times like these make up for the lost time. Like we discussed during our zoom class, I find it confusing as to what impact I can make on the environment. Can my small actions actually make a difference? This is something that I will continue to keep in mind. It is definitely hard having an optimistic outlook on our world today with everything going on, but I need to remember that my small actions can affect others.”

“I think because of what we as a world are going through right now made it easier for me to find gratefulness in the nature around me. Since I am not allowed to leave the house and go anywhere non-essential, being able to go outside and enjoy the sunshine is so helpful. . . . So, being able to escape the crazy and scary world we are living through via nature has really been amazing. Also I love looking out my window and seeing so many families walking together and spending time together. I feel like as a society through this hardship we have been able to really come together even when separated. Furthermore, I think it was easier for me to focus on the positive aspects of the Examen right now considering there is so much negativity surrounding us. I found myself putting more thought into what nature has to offer us right now.”

“It was actually really comforting being able to think about something else going on in the world besides the coronavirus. I was able to think about some positive aspects within the world, including reflecting on nature which was really calming for me. I think all of us are really overwhelmed with everything going on in the world today, so it was nice being able to be with my classmates while going over the examen. I also think it is really

important to take some time to stop whatever we are doing within our lives and think about nature and how it has impacted our lives.”

“I think the most meaningful thing about experiencing the ecological examen online is that I knew that everyone was experiencing something similar to me. Even if we didn't have the same views on the state of the ecological crisis in our world, I knew that they felt the effects of the turmoil to our environment, especially right now. Though most of my thoughts were negative about the nature of our environment, especially after the recent videos and readings we did, it was easier to calm down and find hope by reflecting on the things that I value most about the environment that I am in.”