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Examining life in New York

New York is legendary for its fast pace of life. Like everywhere, people here have trouble finding time to reflect on the meaning of life, or on what it takes to live a fulfilled life. But that is exactly what a group of college students and young professionals did recently at Schuyler Hall, an Opus Dei center in Manhattan, at a seminar entitled “The Examined Life: Philosophical Reflections on Ordinary Life.”

05/10/2004

The seminar was directed by Dr. David Gallagher, a long-time professor of philosophy at Catholic University of America, now working in New York City. His work with students gave him the idea for the seminar. He noted, "I have worked with hundreds of university students and have seen how often they are looking for a framework to think about their lives. I thought it would help them if I could sketch out for them some basic structures that they need to integrate into their lives, such as friendship, virtue, work, leisure and God."

The seminar consisted of a series of 5 talks interspersed by periods of silent reading and reflection. The topics covered in the talks were *Human Freedom as Self-Determination*:

Making a Life-Plan; Life is Serious; Integrating Work, Play and Leisure; Living for Others: Friendship and the Fulfilled Life; Virtues: Being the Kind of Person we Need to Be; and God and the Meaning of our Lives.

The focus of the talks was practical rather than speculative. “The seminar is no mere theoretical exercise providing clearer ideas,” said Dr. Gallagher. “I hope it does do that, but the aim is really practical: to spark the participants to think about their own lives and give them some basic conceptual tools to continue that reflection afterwards. I'd be happy if each one could say: ‘After today, I think about myself differently,’ even ‘I see I need to think about these things.’ In each talk, Dr. Gallagher examined everyday activities and situations to draw out their relationship to human nature and life’s overall purpose.

In between talks, participants took time to read and think about the issues raised in the talks. A diverse collection of books helped them find additional food for thought. Titles ranged from Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning* to C. S. Lewis's *The Abolition of Man* and Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Contra Gentiles*. The participants tried to spend the day in silence so as to help each other reflect on their own lives, rather than become embroiled in philosophical controversies or far-flung theoretical speculations.

Sam Fryd, an undergraduate mathematics student at NYU, found the day helpful. He noted that "the seminar led me to examine my life so as to make specific resolutions for action." Daniel Lee, an accountant, commented on the talks, "I was particularly moved by the reflection on *Integrating Work, Play, and Leisure*. Dr Gallagher enlightened me

on the meaning of leisure and its relevance for people seeking to live a complete life.”

Some of the participants were looking forward to inviting their friends to similar events in the future. Asked why it is important to examine one’s life in this way, Dr. Gallagher answered, “A person who never stops to reflect on his or her life and where it is going will simply be dragged along by the surrounding culture. Authentic freedom – self-direction – implies forming one’s own view of life and its goals.”

The event’s sponsor, Schuyler Hall, is an Opus Dei center for young men in Manhattan.

en-za/article/examining-life-in-new-
york/ (07/31/2025)