

Examination of Conscience

Ignatian

*FOR GOD SO LOVED THE
WORLD
THAT HE GAVE HIS ONLY
BEGOTTEN SON
SO THAT WHOEVER
BELIEVED IN HIM
WILL NOT PERISH BUT HAVE
EVERLASTING LIFE!*

How to prepare for a good confession.

Examination of Conscience

by Fr. John Hardon, S.J.

If there is one part of the spiritual life that St. Ignatius stressed, it was the daily--and even twice daily--examination of conscience.

As we read the <Spiritual Exercises>, we may be overwhelmed by the minute detail of St. Ignatius' treatment of what he calls the particular examination of conscience. At the same time, he is careful to provide, "Some Notes on Scruples."

It is very important, therefore, that we form a clear and correct conscience. This means that we cultivate a sensitive judgment which is alert to the least offense against the Divine will and, at the same time, protect ourselves against the wiles of the evil spirit.

"The enemy," says St. Ignatius, "considers carefully whether one has a lax or a delicate conscience. If one has a delicate conscience, the evil one seeks to make it excessively sensitive in order to disturb and upset it more easily. Thus, if he sees that one will not consent to mortal sin or venial sin, or even to the appearance of deliberate sin, since he cannot cause him to fall in a matter that appears sinful, he strives to make the soul judge that there is a sin, for example in a word or passing thought, where there is no sin" (<Spiritual Exercises>, 349).

It is valuable to reflect on this tactic of the evil spirit before we offer some practical norms for making our daily examination of conscience. Why? Because otherwise, we are liable to overlook the importance of a daily inventory of our moral conduct for fear of becoming scrupulous.

There is such a thing as growing in prudent sensitivity of conscience, without becoming a victim of the "enemy" as St. Ignatius calls him.

We may set this down as a general principle, for those who are sincerely striving to do the will of God:

It is characteristic of God and His angels, when they act upon the soul, to give true happiness and spiritual joy and to banish all the sadness and disturbances which are caused by the enemy.

It is characteristic of the evil one to fight against such happiness and consolation by proposing fallacious reasoning, subtleties, and continual deceptions (Rules for Discernment of Spirits, II, 1).

What are we to conclude from this? That the more zealous we are in trying to please God, the more He will give us a deep interior peace of soul. We should suspect as a temptation from the evil one, when we find ourselves worried or anxious or disturbed, no matter how pious the source of the worry or anxiety may be.

The key to applying this principle is that, before God, I honestly want to do His will even though through weakness, I may fail to live up to my resolutions.

One basic virtue on which we should daily examine ourselves is peace of soul. We should ask ourselves, "Have I given in to worry or anxiety?" "Have I allowed myself to get discouraged?" A good practice is to pronounce the name, "Jesus," when we find ourselves getting despondent, or say some short aspiration like, "My Jesus, I trust in you," whenever we become dejected over something.

PARTICULAR EXAMEN ON THE THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

Before applying the particular examen to my own spiritual life, it is well to first ask myself, "What are the virtues that I know from experience I most need to develop?"

The reason why this question should first be answered is that no two of us are equally prone to commit the same kind of sins. Nor are we personally always tempted in the same direction. There is wisdom in first knowing enough about myself, to be able to get to the root of my own moral weakness. Otherwise, I may be ignoring what really needs attention in my spiritual life and concentrating on what is not so necessary for me at this time in my service of God.

Moreover, it would be a mistake to suppose that by attending to my moral failings, I am being "negative" in my pursuit of holiness.

On the contrary. In God's providence, He allows us to fail in those areas in which He especially wants us to grow in virtue.

We can fail in the practice of these virtues either by commission, omission, or by tepidity, in not acting as generously as we might in responding to the grace we have received from God.

FAITH

1. Do I make an honest effort to grow in the virtue of faith by daily mental prayer on the mysteries of the faith as revealed in the life of Jesus Christ?
2. Do I make at least a short act of faith every day?
3. Do I pray daily for an increase of faith?
4. Do I ever tempt God by relying on my own strength to cope with the trials in my life?
5. Do I unnecessarily read or listen to those who oppose or belittle what I know are truths of my Catholic faith?
6. What have I done today to externally profess my faith?
7. Have I allowed human respect to keep me from giving expression to my faith?
8. Do I make a serious effort to resolve difficulties that may arise about my faith?
9. Do I ever defend my faith, prudently and charitably, when someone says something contrary to what I know is to be believed?
10. Have I helped someone overcome a difficulty against the faith?

HOPE

1. Do I immediately say a short prayer when I find myself getting discouraged?
2. Do I daily say a short act of hope?
3. Do I dwell on my worries instead of dismissing them from my mind?
4. Do I fail in the virtue of hope by my attachment to the things of this world?
5. Do I try to see God's providence in everything that "happens" in my life?
6. Do I try to see everything from the viewpoint of eternity?
7. Am I confident that, with God's grace, I will be saved?
8. Do I allow myself to worry about my past life and thus weaken my hope in God's mercy?
9. Do I try to combine every fully deliberate action with at least a momentary prayer for divine help?
10. How often today have I complained, even internally?

CHARITY

1. Have I told God today that I love Him?
2. Do I tell Jesus that I love Him with my whole heart?
3. Do I take the occasion to tell God that I love Him whenever I experience something I naturally dislike?
4. Have I capitalized on the difficulties today to tell God that I love Him just because He sent me the trial or misunderstanding?
5. Do I see God's love for me in allowing me to prove my love for Him in the crosses He sent me today?
6. Have I seen God's grace to prove my love for Him in every person whom I met today?
7. Have I failed in charity by speaking unkindly about others?
8. Have I dwelt on what I considered someone's unkindness toward me today?
9. Is there someone that I consciously avoid because I dislike the person?
10. Did I try to carry on a conversation today with someone who is difficult to talk to?
11. Have I been stubborn in asserting my own will?
12. How thoughtful have I been today in doing some small favor for someone?
13. Have I allowed my mood to prevent me from being thoughtful of others today?
14. Am I given to dwelling on other people's weaknesses or faults?
15. Have I been cheerful today in my dealings with others?
16. Do I control my uncharitable thoughts as soon as they arise in my mind?
17. Did I pray for others today?
18. Have I written any letters today?
19. Have I controlled my emotions when someone irritated me?
20. Have I performed any sacrifice today for someone?

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Guide for Examination of Conscience for Confession of Sins

6 STEPS FOR A GOOD CONFESSION

1. Examine your conscience - what sins have you committed since your last good confession.
2. Be sincerely sorry for your sins.
3. Confess your sins to the priest.
4. Make certain that you confess all your mortal sins and the number of them.
5. After your confession, do the penance the priest gives to you.
6. Pray daily for the strength to avoid the occasion of sin, especially for those sins you were just absolved from.

ACT OF CONTRITION

O my God, I am heartily sorry for having offended You, and I detest all my sins because I dread the loss of Heaven and the pains of Hell, but most of all because they offend You, my God, Who are all good and deserving of all my love. I firmly resolve, with the help of Your grace, to confess my sins, to do penance, and to amend my life.
Amen.

FIRST COMMANDMENT

"I am the Lord your God. You shall not have strange gods before Me." (Ex 20:2,3)

- Did I doubt or deny that God exists?
- Did I refuse to believe what God has revealed to us?
- Did I believe in fortune telling, horoscopes, dreams, the occult, good-luck charms, tarot cards, palmistry, Ouija boards, seances, reincarnation?

- Did I deny that I was Catholic?
- Did I leave the Catholic Faith?
- Did I give time to God each day in prayer?
- Did I love God with my whole heart?
- Did I despair of or presume on God's mercy?
- Did I have false gods in my life that I gave greater attention to than God, like money, profession, drugs, TV, fame, pleasure, property, etc.?

SECOND COMMANDMENT

"You shall not take the Name of the Lord your God in vain." (Ex 20:7)

- Did I blaspheme or insult God?
- Did I take God's name carelessly or uselessly?
- Did I curse, or break an oath or vow?
- Did I get angry with God?

THIRD COMMANDMENT

"Remember that you keep holy the Sabbath Day." (Ex 20:8)

- Did I miss Mass Sunday or a Holy Day of Obligation through my own fault?
- Did I come to Mass on time? Leave early?
- Did I do work on Sunday that was not necessary?
- Did I set aside Sunday as a day of rest and a family day?
- Did I show reverence in the presence of Jesus in the Most Blessed Sacrament?

FOURTH COMMANDMENT

"Honor your father and your mother." (Ex 20:12)

- Did I disobey or disrespect my parents or legitimate superiors?
- Did I neglect my duties to my husband, wife, children or parents?
- Did I neglect to give good religious example to my family?
- Did I fail to actively take an interest in the religious education and formation of my children?
- Did I fail to educate myself on the true teachings of the Church?
- Did I give scandal by what I said or did, especially to the young?
- Did I cause anyone to leave the faith?

- Did I cause tension and fights in my family?
- Did I care for my aged and infirm relatives?
- Did I give a full day's work for a full day's pay?
- Did I give a fair wage to my employees?

FIFTH COMMANDMENT
"You shall not kill." (Ex 20:13)

- Did I kill or physically injure anyone?
- Did I have an abortion, or advise someone else to have an abortion? (One who procures and abortion is automatically excommunicated, as is anyone who is involved in an abortion, Canon 1398. The excommunication will be lifted in the Sacrament of Reconciliation.)
- Did I use or cause my spouse to use birth control pills (whether or not realizing that birth control pills do abort the fetus if and when conceived)?
- Did I attempt suicide?
- Did I take part in or approve of "mercy killing" (euthanasia)?
- Did I get angry, impatient, envious, unkind, proud, revengeful, jealous, hateful toward another, lazy?
- Did I give bad example by drug abuse, drinking alcohol to excess, fighting, quarreling?
- Did I abuse my children?

SIXTH COMMANDMENT
"You shall not commit adultery." (Ex 20:14) "You shall not covet your neighbor's wife." (Ex 20:17)

Note: In the area of deliberate sexual sins listed below, all are mortal sins if there is sufficient reflection and full consent of the will. "No fornicators, idolaters, or adulterers, no sodomites,... will inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Cor 6:9-10) "Anyone who looks lustfully at a woman has already committed adultery with her in his thoughts." (Mt 5:28)

- Did I willfully entertain impure thoughts or desires?
- Did I use impure or suggestive words? Tell impure stories? Listen to them?
- Did I deliberately look at impure TV, videos, plays, pictures or movies? Or deliberately read impure materials?
- Did I commit impure acts by myself (masturbation)?

- Did I commit impure acts with another - fornication (premarital sex), adultery (sex with a married person)?
- Did I practice artificial birth control (by pills, device, withdrawal)?
- Did I marry or advise anyone to marry outside the Church?
- Did I avoid the occasions of impurity?
- Did I try to control my thoughts?
- Did I engage in homosexual activity?
- Did I respect all members of the opposite sex, or have I thought of other people as objects?
- Did I or my spouse have sterilization done?
- Did I abuse my marriage rights?

SEVENTH & TENTH COMMANDMENTS

"You shall not steal." (Ex 20:15) "You shall not covet your neighbor's goods." (Ex 20:17)

- Did I steal, cheat, help or encourage others to steal or keep stolen goods? Have I made restitution for stolen goods?
- Did I fulfill my contracts; give or accept bribes; pay my bills; rashly gamble or speculate; deprive my family of the necessities of life?
- Did I waste time at work, school or at home?
- Did I envy other people's families or possessions?
- Did I make material possessions the purpose of my life?

EIGHTH COMMANDMENT

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor." (Ex 20:16)

- Did I lie?
- Did I deliberately deceive others, or injure others by lies?
- Did I commit perjury?
- Did I gossip or reveal others' faults or sins?
- Did I fail to keep secret what should be confidential?

OTHER SINS

- Did I fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday?
- Did I eat meat on the Fridays of Lent or Ash Wednesday?
- Did I fail to receive Holy Communion during Eastertide?
- Did I go to Holy Communion in a state of mortal sin? Without

fasting (water and medicine permitted) for one hour from food and drink?

- Did I make a bad confession?
- Did I fail to contribute to the support of the Church?

"Whoever eats the bread and drinks the cup of the Lord unworthily sins against the Body and Blood of the Lord. ... He who eats and drinks without recognizing the Body eats and drinks judgement on himself." (1 Cor 11:27-29)

So, to receive Holy Communion while in the state of mortal sin (having committed a mortal sin which has not been confessed and forgiven in the Sacrament of Confession) is itself a mortal sin - a mortal sin of sacrilege.

"O God, be merciful to me, a sinner." (Lk 18:13)

"Whose sins you shall forgive, they are forgiven..." (Jn 20:23)

"Though your sins be like scarlet, they shall become white as snow. Though they be red like crimson, they shall become white as wool." (Is 1:18)

"If we confess our sins, He who is upright can be depended upon to forgive sins, and to cleanse us from every wrong." (1 Jn 1:9)

"Father, forgive them; they do not know what they are doing." (Lk 23:24)

"Forgive us our sins, for we too forgive all who do us wrong." (Lk 11:4)