

## Examination of Conscience base on the Theological Virtues

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 reasonings, 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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