

Our Own Sins [055-061]

Usual Preparation Prayer.

First Prelude: The composition of Place: The representation will be to see in imagination my soul as a prisoner in this corruptible body, and to consider my whole composite being as an exile here on earth, cast out to live among brute beasts. I said my whole composite being, body and soul. Likewise, if it's easier, you can present yourself before God in the state of a criminal who appears before the judge at court, and is going to hear his sentence.

Second Prelude: The petition: Here the petition will be to ask for a growing and intense sorrow and tears for my sins.

Here Saint Ignatius asks us to call to mind our own sins. This meditation is the best preparation for our general confession and, again, we don't make a general confession because we don't think that we've been forgiven. We make a general confession because it forces us to realize how our lives are deformed and how often we have abused God's gifts; it makes us see what needs reforming in our lives, and renews our appreciation and thankfulness for God's mercy.

In fact, Ignatius discusses this at point 44, saying:

"Among many advantages of a general confession which one makes of his own accord during the time of the Spiritual Exercises, there are especially these three:

- It is true that one who confesses every year has no obligation to make a general confession. But if one is made, there will be much greater merit and profit, because of the greater sorrow experienced for all the sins and perversities of his whole life.
- While one is going through the Spiritual Exercises, a far deeper insight into his sins and their malice is acquired than at a time when he is not so engaged with what concerns his inner life. Since at this time he attains to a deeper knowledge and sorrow for his sins, there will be greater profit and merit than he would otherwise have had.
- As a consequence of having made a better confession, and of being better disposed, he will find that he is more worthy and better prepared to receive the Most Blessed Sacrament. This reception will strengthen him not only against falling into sin, but will also help him to retain the increase of grace which he has gained.

It will be better to make this general confession immediately after the Exercises of the First Week."

Likewise, sometimes a general confession helps with scrupulosity. This was the experience of Saint Peter Faber, who suffered from such terrible scruples that he said that if by going out into the desert and living in solitude on bread and water would have taken them away, he would've done it. Ignatius wisely told him to make the Exercises and make a good general confession, and the rest is, as they say, history.

You can also combine your general confession with a regular one, but you should start

off by saying, “Ok, it’s been how many ever weeks since my last confession, and these are my sins . . .” and then start by saying, “And I’d like to make my general confession.” Otherwise, I’ll think it’s been a super long week for you . . .

[056] The First Point: “This is the record of my sins. I will call to mind all the sins of my life, reviewing year by year, and period by period. Three things will help me in this: First, to consider the place where I lived; secondly, my dealings with others; thirdly, the office I have held.”

So, at this point, we’re to review our entire lives, examining them year by year, to see how and when we’ve fallen short of what God has asked of us. If we think of the place we lived (or maybe the place we went to school, if that’s easier), the people we dealt with, and the job or tasks we were engaged in, we’ll see lots of sins. We can also think break it down into sins of thought, word, and deed, if that’s easier.

We could say that this review isn’t done in the first-person singular, meaning, I’m not trying to go back and re-live those sinful experiences, or bring back memories from the past that could be a source of temptations. I don’t need to examine my sins that way. Instead, we want to review our sins like “a court record of a trial” (in fact, the specific word that Ignatius uses, *proceso de los pecados*, means just this, like, the trial proceedings), or like an eagle sees things from above; it sees them, but not in agonizing detail. The point isn’t to have a detailed record of every little sin that we’ve ever committed, with all the little elements; the point is to focus on the big sins, the mortal sins, which have made us lose sanctifying grace and have turned us and our gifts against God.¹

“Sins of childhood, sins of early youth, sins of later. Examine all your years; what day was there that you didn’t sin? Ask all the laws of God; is there a single one that you didn’t break? Ask all your past temptations; are there many times you didn’t fall? Ask all your faculties; is there any that’s not guilty of sin? Ask all your senses: your eyes, your ears, your mouth, your sense of touch, your sense of smell: which is there that hasn’t served as an instrument of iniquity?”²

[057] The Second Point: “I will weigh the gravity of my sins, and see the loathsomeness and malice which every mortal sin I have committed has in itself, even though it were not forbidden.”

The loathsomeness and malice of each mortal sin: “Mortal sin is a supreme contempt for the infinite majesty of God. The creature despises the laws the Creator has made for him, for his good, and instead laughs God to scorn. The one who sins mortally would kill God if he could, since God and sin cannot exist close together. Those who live in mortal sin act as if God didn’t exist. Infinite Love, Power, Goodness, Wisdom, and Mercy could be dead, as far as the grave sinner is concerned. He or she simply isn’t interested.”³

¹ The early Jesuit directories emphasize that a focused list of mortal sins is more effective in generating contrition and sorrow than a long list of all the sins one has ever committed.

² *Manresa, or, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius for General Use*, 305.

³ Cf. Rev. Fr. Francis J. Ripley *This Is the Faith: A Complete Explanation of the Catholic Faith*

“How loathsome sin is! It is supreme ugliness, since it is infinitely opposed to supreme beauty, which is God. How ungrateful sin is! You withhold everything from God, and dare to tell Him, ‘Go away from me! Leave me alone; get out of my heart, which is created to love You. Get out of my being, which I was given only to serve You!’”

“How bold sin is! You dare to tell God, ‘I will not serve; I will not obey.’ And you dare to say it to God’s face, right as you stand on the edge of the grave, on the brink of hell, where you are held suspended by a thin thread called life.”⁴

This malice would be there “even though [these sins] were not forbidden.” In other words, the point isn’t just that we’ve broken the law. Sin isn’t bad simply because God forbids it. Sin, and mortal sin in particular, is horrible because of the disorder it implies, the hatred it entails, and the perversion it means. There is an ontological problem with sin; it is a lack of being, a parasite, an intrinsic lack of perfection. In themselves, sins are horrible, and in forbidding them God is doing us a favor by telling us to avoid them. And yet, we go ahead and do them anyways.

[058] Third Point: “I will consider who I am, and by means of examples humble myself: What am I compared with all men? What are all men compared with the angels and saints of paradise? Consider what all creation is in comparison with God. Then I alone, what can I be? I will consider all the corruption and loathsomeness of my body. I will consider myself as a source of corruption and contagion from which has issued countless sins and evils and the most offensive poison.”

What I am compared with all the men and women who have ever lived? There’s around 7 billion people alive right now, and 108 billion have been born on this planet. What percentage of the population am I? “What is a leaf in comparison with the forest? A grain of sand compared with the beach? Considered this way, little me is nothing.”

Consider all these people, though, compared with one angel, in all its glory, all its power, all its strength. All those people are nothing compared to a single angel.

And yet, what are all men and women, all angels, and all creation, when compared with God? Absolutely nothing. They are nothing. And yet little me, in my littleness and insignificance, have dared to rebel against God, like a spoiled child who throws a tantrum. It like “when a parent feels the strangeness of the power of the obstinate will of his children to resist and spurn persuasion, love, hope, or fear of punishment. A power so strong resides in a body so small and a mind so childish; yet it is a faint picture of men when they have willfully sinned.”⁵

[059] Fourth Point: “I will consider who God is against whom I have sinned, going through His attributes and comparing them with their contraries in me: His wisdom with my ignorance, His power with my weakness, His justice with my iniquity, His goodness with my wickedness.”

⁴ *Manresa, or, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius for General Use*, 306-7.

⁵ Fulton Sheen, *Life of Christ*.

Consider God's attributes: "For the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25).

Or, as God tells Job (Chapters 38-40): "Who is this who darkens counsel with words of ignorance? Where were you when I founded the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding. Who determined its size? Surely you know? Who stretched out the measuring line for it? Into what were its pedestals sunk, and who laid its cornerstone? Have you ever in your lifetime commanded the morning and shown the dawn its place For taking hold of the ends of the earth, till the wicked are shaken from it? Have you entered into the sources of the sea, or walked about on the bottom of the deep? Have the gates of death been shown to you, or have you seen the gates of darkness? Have you comprehended the breadth of the earth? Tell me, if you know it all. Have you entered the storehouses of the snow, and seen the storehouses of the hail Which I have reserved for times of distress, for a day of war and battle? What is the way to the parting of the winds, where the east wind spreads over the earth?"

Then Job answered the LORD and said: "Look, I am of little account; what can I answer you? I put my hand over my mouth. I have spoken once, I will not reply; twice, but I will do so no more. Then the LORD answered Job out of the storm and said: I will question you, and you tell me the answers! Would you refuse to acknowledge my right? Would you condemn me that you may be justified? Have you an arm like that of God, or can you thunder with a voice like his? Adorn yourself with grandeur and majesty, and clothe yourself with glory and splendor. Let loose the fury of your wrath; look at everyone who is proud and bring them down. Look at everyone who is proud, and humble them. Tear down the wicked in their place, bury them in the dust together; in the hidden world imprison them."

[060] Fifth Point: "This is a cry of wonder accompanied by surging emotion as I pass in review all creatures. How is it that they have permitted me to live, and have sustained me in life! Why have the angels, though they are the sword of God's justice, tolerated me, guarded me, and prayed for me! Why have the saints interceded for me and asked favors for me! And the heavens, sun, moon, stars, and the elements; the fruits, birds, fishes, and other animals—why have they all been at my service! How is it that the earth did not open to swallow me up, and create new hells in which I should be tormented forever!"

See what mercy God has had! See all the creatures placed on this earth that, rather than destroy you, have instead kept you in being! How all creation, the natural world, which, by its very nature, serves God, has been placed at your disposal! The sun, the moon, and the stars, instead of falling upon you, have given you light and joy! The earth, rather than swallow you up like Dathan, Abiram, and Korah (cf. Numbers 16:31), has supported you and kept you alive! How the waters, rather than rush over you and end your life, as happened to so many in Noah's day, have sustained you in being! How the animals, rather than throw themselves at you to destroy you, have served you with their lives! How the angels, who cannot stand iniquity, have tolerated your sins, as though they turned a blind eye to them! How the saints, seeing your terrible deeds, rather than condemn you, interceded for you! Such is the mercy and greatness of God!

For our many sins, what punishment haven't we deserved! And yet, God sustained us,

and ordered all creation to our good!

[061] *Colloquy*: I will conclude with a colloquy, extolling the mercy of God our Lord, pouring out my thoughts to Him, and giving thanks to Him that up to this very moment He has granted me life. I will resolve with His grace to amend for the future. Close with an Our Father.