

DAY #23: Conference

GENERAL EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE [43]

General and Particular Examination

We have already spoken about the examination of conscience when we gave the talk on preparing **confession** (Day 15). However, given the importance that St. Ignatius gives to this practice and that he offers more than one type of examination, we return to the topic here, *in extenso*, but showing it as something not only linked to confession. We will begin with a brief consideration on the idea of self-examination in general (part 1) followed by a detailed examination of the general examination of conscience (part 2).

Part 1- CONTINUOUS REFLECTION ON ONESELF

Concerning the method of St. Ignatius, it is absolutely impossible to dispense with a psychological element of primary force, which is **reflection**. His conversion and the entire process of his holiness bear the stamp of a deep internal observation that has been transferred without any detriment to his *Spiritual Exercises*.

First comes the examination, and it can be stated with all certainty that there is no ascetic method that gives it as much importance as that of St. Ignatius. In his method, eight examinations are made per day (assuming one is meditating five times a day in the 'standard' spiritual exercises): twice the **particular examination**, at least once the **general examination**, and five of a quarter-hour each at the end of the five meditations, giving us in total two full hours of reflection on oneself. This supposes in the exercitant a vigor and an interior balance that are not at all ordinary, if they are done properly, casting off all weakness and all preoccupation.

It is good to note that the two examinations we have just discussed are placed immediately after the Principle and Foundation; that is, next to the marvelous synthesis **of the most essential ideal of perfection that can be conceived. What a contrast and what efficacy at the same time!** According to this, the Exercises begin with the two said examinations, and with this St. Ignatius **wants to indicate to us that they occupy a most principal place in his system.** The Saint doubtless remembered that his conversion had its beginnings in that series of internal analyses with which he examined and compared the different movements of his soul. For certain exercitants and attending to their personal conditions, he dispenses them from some more difficult and burdensome things. From the examination, he never dispenses anyone.

St. Ignatius's intention is that the first impression the exercitant receives be of **a great introspective tendency**, and that he becomes accustomed not only to noticing but to analyzing all his acts, even the most intimate ones. **What finesse and precision of analysis, that of St. Ignatius!** He is not satisfied with the simple verification of facts; he wants us to become accustomed to investigating their causes, as he does by analyzing the origin of our thoughts [32].

Prayer: ...to each point of the prayer invariably follows, as if it were its shadow, an *act of reflection*. This matter of **reflection** is for St. Ignatius a topic explicitly repeated by him even in cases where it could easily be understood, and a voice that calls the exercitant to **"reflect within himself to derive some profit"** [123]. It is easily understood that the man who ceaselessly repeats to us that our knowledge

must be "**internal**" and that it must come to become "**feeling**" has his gaze fixed on such a thought, until he sees it made flesh within a sincere and robust will.

Rules for Discernment: they are "*similar to psychological laboratory experiences ordered to discovering the true motive of our internal acts: whether it is God, the devil, or ourselves. There, sadness and joy, dryness and consolation, fear and hope, thoughts whose cause is unknown and those that have their origin in a preceding and already investigated cause, are subjected to the spiritual reagents of the master.*" (Casanovas)

Part 2- THE GENERAL EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE [32]

When, for the first time, five years exactly after having been written, the book of the Exercises was cited to judgment before an ecclesiastical tribunal of theologians and jurists, and when St. Ignatius counted, regarding sacred sciences, only with extremely poor principles, the only thing in it that called the attention of those judges was **the intrepidity with which the most delicate and fine acts of thought were analyzed and clarified in the book, defining in each case their degree of responsibility. These finesses and exquisite observations are found in the general examination.** Already in the very title, St. Ignatius declares that the examination is **not limited** to preparing the exercitant to make a good confession, but aims to **achieve the purity of the soul.**

First Part

This document of St. Ignatius has two very distinct parts: one *of moral instruction* that, in making the division into thoughts, words, and works, touches on some particular points, defining when mortal or venial sin is committed; and the other, **practical**, that teaches **how** the general examination should be made [43].

Let us consider the title that St. Ignatius puts on this document. [32] "*The purpose of this examination of conscience is to purify the soul and to aid us to improve our confessions.*"

To cleanse oneself is to remove from our customs everything that is mortal sin, venial sin, or deliberate imperfection; what St. Ignatius calls "**Appearance of deliberate sin**" [348, 349] in the rules for "*feeling scruples and suggestions of our enemy.*"

The first thing that must be done in this work of cleansing or amending one's customs is to refine the moral conscience well, so that the man, without falling into scruples, learns to become aware of mortal and venial sins and even deliberate imperfections, and knows how to distinguish when something is a mortal sin, a venial sin, or only an imperfection.

Second Part

The second part of the document can serve us for our entire life, as it teaches us the **practical way** to make the general examination of conscience daily.

[43] - Method of Making the General Examination of Conscience

There are five points in this method

1. *The first point is to give thanks to God our Lord for the favors received.*
2. *The second point is to ask for grace to know my sins and to rid myself of them.*
3. *The third point is to demand an account of my soul from the time of rising up to the present examination. I should go over one hour after another, one period after another. The thoughts should be examined first, then the words, and finally, the deeds in the same order as was explained under the Particular Examination of Conscience.*

4. The fourth point will be to ask pardon of God our Lord for my faults.
5. The fifth point will be to resolve to amend with the grace of God. Close with an Our Father.

What is the **purpose** of such an examination in the spiritual life?

The answer will indicate to us the spirit with which we must do it. To say that the daily general examination is a means to purify our souls of their ordinary faults and a remote preparation that ensures and facilitates general confession would be to answer the question inadequately. Certainly, those are good fruits of the examination, but **St. Ignatius goes after a spiritual purpose of higher importance; he intends that our daily faults do not cool our fervor, and even less our love for God.**

It is very interesting how St. Ignatius took great care that nothing would take away from him that "**desire to make progress**" that he had from the beginning. In this sense, it can be said that if something cools our devotion, it must fall under the rule of the *tantum-quantum*; an example can serve: writes Father Rivadeneira:

*"Continuing, then, in the exercises of his studies, **some learned and pious** men advised him that, in order to learn the **Latin language** well and at the same time deal with devout and spiritual things, he should read the book **De milite christiano**, which means *On a Christian Knight... composed in Latin by Erasmus of Rotterdam...* And among others who were of this opinion, his **confessor** was also. And so, taking his advice, he began with all **simplicity** to read it with great care and note its phrases and ways of speaking. But he noticed something **very new and very marvelous**, which is that upon taking the book of Erasmus in his hands, beginning to read in it, **simultaneously his fervor began to cool** and his **devotion to grow cold**. And the more he went on reading, the more this change grew. So that when he finished the reading, it seemed to him that all the fervor he had before had ended and frozen... And as he noticed this a few times, he finally threw the book away".*

Let us continue with the examination of conscience:

To know the way to become saints and to know how to love God surrounded by faults is a capital point and matter.

Let us be convinced of this sad reality; that is, that we will always have faults and that to be completely without them is an extraordinary gift that we cannot count on.

Let this other point also be well established: that **despite faults we can and must be saints**. What St. Ignatius warns in the meditation on hell is very much to the point here, namely, that **faults can make us forget the love of God** [65].

Consequently, there are faults that diminish fervor, and others that do not. The cause of such a difference is not totally objective but has its subjective part; that is, it is not in them, but also partly in ourselves. One will preserve fervor or lose it, depending on whether one knows or not how to walk among said faults. There lies the purpose of the general examination; its office is to **help preserve fervor, without it being destroyed by the faults of each day.**

Let us consider now the five steps of St. Ignatius' *General Examination of Conscience*.

(1) THE 1ST POINT IS TO GIVE THANKS TO GOD OUR LORD FOR THE BENEFITS RECEIVED[43, 1]

St. Ignatius seeks to contrast our daily faults with the infinite benefits we receive from God, repeated by Him each day and with the same love as always. **Creation, redemption, and providence are renewed with new marvels of the Lord's goodness, every day and at every moment**, without our multiplied miseries being a reason for Him to turn His eyes away from us sinners.

What a different aspect our faults acquire if we project them onto the heart of God and the heart of Jesus, who despite my ingratitude has loved me and loves me unto death! Seen thus, not only do they not cool the love of God in our heart, but they ignite it even more. That is why St. Ignatius wants **the first point of the examination to be to give thanks to God for the benefits received.**

From this naturally arise the acts of sorrow and purpose, which are the last two points of the examination, and the principal ones in the judgment of ascetic authors.

(2) THE 2ND IS TO ASK FOR GRACE TO KNOW THE SINS AND TO CAST THEM OUT.

Without me you can do nothing. (Jn 15:5)

Great is the power of daily introspection to discover faults; but of itself, without a superior light, it is not sufficient. A ray of light enters a room and we see infinite particles fluttering in the air that we did not know existed.

Regarding our intentions, the principal motive of our acts, and the complicated ends we sometimes propose in them, there are very dark depths in our spirit.

Only the supernatural spirit that searches the depths of God and the divine word that reaches to the division of soul and spirit can illuminate before our eyes those darknesses of the spirit, revealing to us the good and evil of our acts.

God our Lord gives this wisdom from heaven to the one who asks for it with humility and sincerity, confidently and constantly; that is why St. Ignatius wants us to ask for it every day and in each of the examinations.

(3) THE 3RD: THE THIRD POINT IS TO DEMAND AN ACCOUNT OF MY SOUL FROM THE TIME OF RISING UP TO THE PRESENT EXAMINATION. I SHOULD GO OVER ONE HOUR AFTER ANOTHER, ONE PERIOD AFTER ANOTHER. THE THOUGHTS SHOULD BE EXAMINED FIRST, THEN THE WORDS, AND FINALLY, THE DEEDS IN THE SAME ORDER AS WAS EXPLAINED UNDER THE PARTICULAR EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE.

Between the two equally vicious extremes, namely: that of those who feel *laziness* and even horror at examining their works, and that of those who suffer a true *obsession* in this and would never finish examining themselves, there exists the just mean of demanding an account of one's acts, firmly, yes, but at the same time with a *peaceful serenity of spirit*.

Of transcendental importance in our spiritual life is **knowing our own faults**. In a house without a guardian, nothing is secure, and **whoever wants to preserve his treasures must be very aware of**

who enters and leaves his house. This comparison declares to us the difference between the man who does not take account of his most intimate acts and the one who knows them one by one.

The first, almost without noticing it, finds that he has completely lost the treasure of the holy desires that enflamed him, because it has been stolen from him by the mob of defective thoughts, words, and works that have entered everywhere without anyone hindering them; whereas **the second** either does not let any of these enemies pass, or if one has entered his house, it does not leave without him first knowing it registered. This is the first purpose of the daily general examination.

To give us a perfect account of our works, the Saint instructs that around them we analyze our thoughts, words, and works. This does not mean that in all of them these three things must be examined, because in many of them there will be no reason to; but that we look at each one from the side that is most convenient for doing it with perfection. If one has a written list of the day's occupations, it will be very convenient to have studied what in each work should be examined in a special way, considering its nature, or the times we usually fail in it, or the plans of perfection that we have drawn up.

The knowledge of our faults would not completely neutralize the harmful influence they exercise on our fervor, and for this reason, St. Ignatius places in the examination other essential acts that we have already been seeing.

(4) **THE 4TH: TO ASK GOD OUR LORD FOR FORGIVENESS FOR THE FAULTS.**

If we feel things as St. Ignatius proposes them, our sorrow will easily be **of contrition**, because it will originate from the contrast between our malice and the infinite goodness of God. It will be a loving sorrow, which will not shrink, adjusting to the measure of our miseries, but will extend through the immensities of God's merciful love, which, as the Church sings, **shows His omnipotence in nothing more than in being kind and forgiving**. It will be a humble, quiet, and trusting sorrow, considering that God our Lord loves us, not for some perfection of ours, which we have none, but moved by His fatherly heart, which loves His child all the more the poorer and wounded from head to toe He sees him. And this sorrow will naturally end in love, enlivening each time more that valiant boldness with which we asked ourselves in the Exercises what we should do for Christ, and we offered ourselves to Him to follow Him even unto Death. With this, our faults, far from being water that cools our love for God, **will be fuel that ignites it more and more each time**.

The purpose will run along the same path: it will be sincere, humble, and trusting. An examination whose principal end was the exact knowledge of all our faults would easily engender in us discouragement, seeing ourselves fall each day; and it could even lead us, if not to despair, at least to a dark pessimism, persuading us that we were not born for holiness.

On the contrary, **an examination oriented mainly to fostering in us the love of God will make us base all our trust, not in ourselves, but solely in God**; and consequently, we will look with confidence at tomorrow, expecting everything from His infinite mercy.

If God does not tire, nor turns His back on me seeing my daily faults, why should I tire of bearing with myself? If God gives me a new day to love Him, why not enter it, full of humility and trusting



hope that I will also love Him a little more? I have no guarantees to support these promises of mine, but I can secure them in the infinite love that will help me.

St. Ignatius in the Constitutions instructs that the general examination be done twice a day together with the particular examination; at noon and at night. Those who want to lead a spiritual life should do it, at least, once a day.

**(5) - THE FIFTH POINT WILL BE TO RESOLVE TO AMEND WITH THE GRACE OF GOD.
CLOSE WITH AN *OUR FATHER***

We aren't content with mediocrity. Yes, we have sinned, but we must strive to *go and sin no more* (Jn 8:11). Just as we resolve after each confession: "I firmly resolve with the help of your grace, to sin no more and to avoid the near occasions of sin, Amen.", so too we make resolution in our general examination of conscience.

This isn't to say "I will be perfect in the future". We are very much aware of our faults, our weaknesses, and failings. We hope to sin no more. The key element is that we are 'striving'. Let us recall in the first conference on discernment of spirits, the two 'types of man'. One falls from mortal sin to another, with no care at all. Another strives to be holy. This resolution is a declaration of our attempt to sin no more, not a guarantee of fidelity. It is also in a sense a prayer, asking God that it be so, that we – by the help of His grace – sin no more.

One of the great lies the devil tells us is that "we have sinned too much, we can never break free, we are offending God by our constant efforts and failures." Yet we know it is the opposite. Our God is a merciful Father, who wants to help us overcome our falls. He is ready to forgive us 70 times 7 times. So let us strive to *work out your own salvation with fear and trembling* (Phil 2:12), recalling the words of St. Paul earlier in his letter to the Philippians: *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ* (Phil 1:6).

May God bless you all.