



DAY #35: Conference

REFORM OF LIFE [189]

Welcome to Day 35 of the Spiritual Exercises Online. We gave thanks to God for the grace of perseverance this far. Today we will have conference focused on what St. Ignatius refers to as a “Reform” (or amendment) of one’s way of living in his state of life. Let’s begin with a prayer:

Our Father...Hail Mary...Glory Be...

INTRODUCTION

In the exercises, we are seeking to grow in holiness, to grow deeper in our relationship with Jesus Christ. This work – as we have seen so many times – is a work first and foremost of God’s grace (who loved us first, cf. 1 Jn 4:19) but also our free cooperation. Just as God – through the angel – asked Mary to “give Him a human nature” (in the Annunciation of the Incarnation, which the Church celebrates tomorrow, also the anniversary of our foundation, so please pray for us priests and seminarians and brothers and sisters of the religious family of the Incarnate Word!) – so He too asks us to “give Him our nature”, that is, to let Him ‘live in us’ (cf. Rm 8:10) We cooperate in this ‘vocation’ (call) in our prayers and works and through the reception of the sacraments. But also, through a particular state of life (our vocation). This was considered more in the conference on the “**Election**” that we had a few days ago. Now we look more at what to do for those who are in a fixed state of life (but note that this is **relevant** for those who are **discerning a vocation** as well).

St. Ignatius writes in point 189:

[189] *Directions for the Amendment and Reformation of One's Way of Living in His State of Life*

*It must be borne in mind that **some** may be established in an **ecclesiastical office**, or may be **married**, and hence cannot make a choice of a state of life, or, in matters that may be changed and hence are subject to a choice, they may not be very willing to make one.*

*It will be very profitable for such persons, whether they possess great wealth or not, in **place of a choice**, to **propose** a way for **each** to **reform his manner of living** in his state by setting before him the **purpose of his creation** and of his life and position, namely, the glory and praise of God our Lord and the salvation of his soul.*

*If he is really to attain this end, during the Exercises and during the consideration of the ways of making a choice as explained above, he will have to examine and weigh in all its details how **large** a household he should maintain, how he ought to **rule** and govern it, how he ought to **teach** its members by word and example. So too he should consider what part of his means should be used for his family and household, how much should be set aside for distribution to the poor and other pious purposes.*

*Let him desire and seek nothing except the greater praise and glory of God our Lord as the aim of all he does. For every one must keep in mind that in all that concerns the spiritual life his progress will be in proportion to his **surrender of self-love** and of his **own will** and **interests**.*

Commentary on St. Ignatius

We can say that the Reform of Life is part of “center” or “heart” of the Spiritual Exercises, as are the “Elections” for those preparing to make a choice on a more serious matter. Why? Because this is the time where we make **concrete resolutions** on how we are going to grow in holiness. Good **desires** are **important**; we spent the day seeking that “generous” spirit demanded of one who takes the exercises. We have then considered fundamental truths such as the Principle & Foundation, our grand calling, our weakness to carry it out (sins, failings), and God’s mercy in spite of this. We contemplated the call of *Christ the King*, deepened our understanding of this in the *Two Standards*, *Three Classes of Men*, and *Three Kinds of Humility*. We cannot forget to recall our consideration of Christ’s hidden life, His fundamental virtues, humility, obedience, and poverty.

God willing, we have received many lights throughout these exercises (usually, the **fruits** of each meditation), areas to work on, things we need to do. We may now, as St. Paul ask: *What am I to do, Lord?* (Acts 22:10)

This is the spirit of the Reform of Life. Let us recall the goal of the spiritual exercises: *Which have as their purpose the **conquest of self** and the **regulation of one’s life** in such a way that no decision is made under the influence of any inordinate attachment* [21].

In other words, we to decrease that Christ may increase (cf. Jn 3:30). To strip off the old self (cf. Eph 4:22ff; Col 3:9-10; Rm 6:6) that we may put on Christ (cf. Rm 13:14; Gal 3:27). We are seeking to prepare the ground that the seed may grow to a hundred-fold (cf. Mt 13) to remove the thorns that choke, to break up that hard ground where no roots can form.

How exactly is this to be done?

What is the Reform of Life?

Let us consider again the words of St. Ignatius: ***Amendment and Reformation***. What is an amendment? This looks at the negative side: the correction of sins and evil habits. And reform? This is to “give new form” or “shape” to one’s life.

We have said before and it bears repeating: our resolutions must be **concrete**. The devil will rejoice if we plan to “grow in holiness” and “be better in the community”, etc. As we saw in an earlier conference, without concrete and realistic resolutions, we can never actually choose them.

THE REFORM (PLAN) OF LIFE

The reform (also called a *plan*) of life, as its name indicates, designates the project of the main activities and objectives that a subject intends to carry out in a determined period of time (the rest of the year, or for the next two or five years, etc.). On the spiritual plane it is a **program of perfection**. It is fitting to have a plan of life because holiness is not improvised: the one who wants to achieve something in life, whether in the human order or in the supernatural, must sit down and foresee, think and plan. Without a plan of life much time is wasted without remedy: Doubts arise about what we ought to do; we waste time in superfluous deliberations; despite much deliberating we usually remain with doubts. – We neglect some of our obligations for lack of foresight and of organization, for proposing ends without determining the means or for taking hold at the moment of ineffective

or less effective means, etc. – And by this neglect, finally, we expose ourselves to inconstancy and to the abandonment of the works undertaken. On the contrary, the plan of life gives us: Order, it helps us to gain time. It makes us “supernaturalize” the works (because we do them out of obedience to the plan, that is, to the decisions taken in conscience before God; provided the plan is made as God commands). It also has a great educational value insofar as it tempers our will (makes it more austere, free of whims, subjects it to an order and makes it acquire constancy).

What is the spirit of the plan? As St. Ignatius often stresses, we must begin with the end in mind, always to seek the will of God. We can:

1. Place our end before us as Christians, according to my state of life (married? Son? Daughter? Brother? Worker? Priest?)
2. Place myself in the presence of God and His heavenly court; and desire to choose what is best, what we would want to choose at the moment of death [186] and judgment [187]

1) Characteristics of the Reform of Life

For it to be *real* every plan of life must have certain qualities:

- It must be **adapted to the duties of state**, to the habitual occupations, to the dispositions of spirit, of character and temperament of each one, to his strengths and to his current state of perfection.
- It must be **flexible** and **rigid** at the same time.
 - *Flexible* so as not to enslave the soul to the plan, when charity toward neighbor, or some grave unforeseen circumstance, or obedience to superiors makes some project unrealizable.
 - With a *certain rigidity*, so that the subject does not modify it according to his whims. It must contain what is necessary to determine the time and manner of doing the diverse activities, duties of state, exercises of piety and the acquisition of the most necessary virtues.
- If possible, it should be **made in accord with one’s spiritual director**. Prudence demands it, which teaches us that one is not a good judge in his own cause nor a skillful guide of himself; also obedience, by which the plan of life reviewed and authorized by the director extends the action of the latter to the rest of our life.

2) Material for the Reform

There are many ways we can break out what I should do, and we can consider more than one “way”. The point is to develop concrete solutions of how to grow in our life. Here is a possible method:

WHAT HAVE I DONE? WHAT SHOULD I DO FOR CHRIST?

I - What have I done for Christ?

Here we look at our past, primarily focusing on our defects and sins. What sins do I confess often? Why do I keep falling in them? What is my dominant defect? We have hopefully seen much of this during our exercises. Recall that each exercise, we sought a “concrete fruit”. Now we can go through and examine them.

II - What should I do for Christ?

This looks to the present. What should I do, now? We must fight against our defects and vices by growing in virtue.

But what should I do **concretely**? We can view some of the key areas of our life :

a) **Human formation**: this means our human personality, our balance. Concretely what we need to look at here are:

- the virtues I need to acquire
- the defects I need to combat
- my dominant defect that I must identify and fight against
- Interior and exterior order in my life
- My emotions: my capacity for friendship, my attachments

b) **Spiritual Life**

- What is my life of prayer like?
- What is my **participation** like in the liturgy? My Communion? Thanksgiving?
- What is my **preparation** for the Liturgy? (readings, intention, offering)
- How am I doing on my acts of piety? (rosary, devotions?)
- Do I go to regular confession? How do I prepare? Do I see contrition as most important?
- Do I see prayer only as a duty, or do I seek to see our Lord in the chapel?

c) **Community Life**

In the laity this dimension is developed fundamentally in their family life:

- The relationship with parents and siblings, or with one's spouse and children: the virtues of obedience, respect, filial piety, etc.
- Family charity.
- Solidarity and concern for others, etc.
- Responsibility in work and in the profession.

In the case of the **religious**, participation in the community life could look at the following:

- Participation in the community, in recreations.
- The contribution of one's own talents for the profit of the neighbor.
- Fraternal charity.
- Obedience to superiors.
 - Transparency toward superiors.
 - Trust in superiors.
- Generosity; the capacity for offering and immolation.
- Poverty, chastity, the fulfillment of duties of state.

d) **Pastoral formation**

- Discern what God is asking me to do in the apostolate (participate in events in Church? Outreach?)
- Prayer and mortification for my apostolate
- Preparation for my apostolate

- Development and growth of my apostolate
- Apostolic zeal

3) – What does the plan look like?

The exact details of a Reform or Plan of life can vary by person, but concretely speaking, it should be simple, challenging but possible, and concrete. It should have items to work on in a focused manner (a particular virtue one wants to grow in, and a specific way to do it), possibly grouped under the various categories we saw above (human, spiritual etc.) It shouldn't be too long, no more than a page or two. In summary, it ought to include:

- **Amendment:** key areas where I fall and need to improve, seeking to know the **root causes** (WHY DO I KEEP FAILING? WHERE TO WORK?)
- **Reform:** a couple specific virtues to start with, along with others for the future.
- **A basic daily schedule** (time for prayer, work, study, community, free time, etc.)
- **The basic projects I wanted to accomplish:** these tasks are all of the things that I've seen that I need to work on: which one is the most urgent? And after I accomplish that, where do I go from there? What follows next?
- **The development or progress of that project:** with what means will I accomplish the task that I'm proposing for myself (for instance, to acquire this or that virtue, to overcome this or that vice, what acts must I perform? How often?) The essential and indispensable mean for this is the daily examination of conscience

4) Rendering an account

- "Each month, in a monthly retreat, I should examine what I've done, make decisions, to impose some sort of punishment on myself if I need to, examine what steps should be the next ones, etc.
- So what does my growth in virtue look like?
- Annual retreat: I see key areas I am falling in (e.g. dominant defect, recurring sins, lack of generosity)
- Review with spiritual director: have him confirm the area of work, and develop a concrete particular examination of conscience
- Daily Particular Exam (& general exam)
- Monthly retreat: review the full plan of life.

SOME EXAMPLES TO CONSIDER:

St. John Bosco

“- Having entered the seminary (Don Bosco) and wearing the clerical habit he makes a reform of life: “That day he writes in a little notebook, which he will keep preciously, what is going to be the norm of his life.

1.- In the future I will not take part in public spectacles, in fairs or markets; nor will I attend dances, nor theaters and, as far as possible, neither will I go to the meals that are usually given on such occasions.

2.- Never again will I do feats of prestidigitation, of acrobatics, nor sleight of hand; nor will I play the violin, nor will I go out to hunt. I repute these things contrary to the gravity of the ecclesiastical spiritual.

3.- I will love and practice retreat, temperance in eating and drinking, and I will not take more hours of rest than those absolutely necessary for health.

4.- Since in the past I have served the world with profane readings, in the future I will procure to serve God, giving myself to religious readings.

5.- I will combat with all my strengths every thing, every reading, thought, word and work contrary to the virtue of chastity. And, conversely, I will practice all those things, even the smallest ones, that can contribute to conserving this virtue.

6.- Besides the ordinary practices of piety, I will never omit doing each day a bit of spiritual reading.

7.- Each day I will relate some example or useful maxim to souls. I will do this with my companions, my relatives and relations, and, in their absence, I will do it with my mother.

In the fervor of his new state John exaggerates some points of his plan of life. Consulted shortly after, the pious Saint Joseph Cafasso shows him the futility of certain sacrifices. Why renounce those skills with which he can recreate his companions in propitious hours? Certain walks in the fresh air, or attendance at social parties, are not bad in themselves either, and can serve to maintain cordiality among the neighbors of a town, and the friendship of the priest...". (Hugo Wast)

Saint Dominic Savio

“Purposes that I, Dominic Savio, made in the year 1849 when I made my first communion at seven years of age: 1st- I will confess very often and I will receive sacred communion whenever the confessor allows me. (Don Bosco: make good communions and good confessions) 2nd- I want to sanctify the feast days. 3rd- My friends will be Jesus and Mary. 4th- Better to die than to sin.” These memories, which he repeated often, were the norm of all his acts until the end of his life.

Laura Vicuña:

“1. I want, my Jesus, to love You and serve You during all my life; for that I offer You all my soul, my heart and all my being. 2. I want to die rather than offend You with sin; and for that I want to depart from everything that can separate me from You. 3. I promise to do on my part whatever I know and can, even with great sacrifices, so that You may be always more known and loved, and to repair the offenses that every day men who do not love You inflict on You, especially those that You receive from mine. Oh, my God, grant me a life of love, of mortification and of sacrifice!”

Saint Cajetan

“The Church needs reform and the reform must begin with me.”

CONCLUSION

We want to grow in holiness, but how weak we are and how often we fall: *do no violence to the place where the righteous live;¹⁶ for though they fall seven times, they will rise again; but the wicked are overthrown by calamity.* (Prov 24:15-16)



The key is to keep striving, to “rise” (with the help of God) again. Don’t be surprised you haven’t achieved perfection. Look less and less to self, and more to Christ.

St. Therese of Lisieux: *“I fall into many imperfections, but I rejoice in them...it is so sweet to feel one-self weak & little. & profit by imperfections”*

St. Teresa of Avila: *For God often desires that His chosen ones **feel** their wretchedness, and He withdraws His favor a little...This **distress** [**seeing their fault**], I think, is a great mercy from God; and although it is a defect, it is very **beneficial** for **humility** (Interior Castle, 2, 60)*

May God bless you.