



DAY 15: Conference

THE EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE & THE GENERAL CONFESSION [32 & 44]

1. Why Examination?

Fr. Villoslada, speaking of our Saint, affirms:

“We know that Ignatius of Loyola was always tremendously reflective, perhaps the most reflective of all the men known in history.”

And in the footnote he clarifies:

“When making these categorical affirmations, I have in mind Confucius and the interiorizing doctrine of Buddhism, Socrates’ insistence on ‘Know thyself,’ the recommendations of Seneca and other Stoics, the practices of certain Islamic moralists, the teachings of the Holy Fathers of the Church, the reflowering of the examination of conscience with the *Devotio moderna*, etc.”

The Saint, then, seeks to help us profit from something so important and so proper to the human person, since, apart from the angels, there is no creature capable of reflecting on itself.

Speaking of the examination of conscience, St. John of Ávila comments:

“Because you will hardly find anything so useful for amending one’s life as for a man to take account of how he spends it and of the faults he commits. For the soul that is not careful to examine its thoughts, words, and deeds is similar to the vineyard of the slothful man, of which the Wise Man says (Prov. 24:30): that he passed by it and saw its hedge broken down and full of thorns. (...)”

And because of this, and many other good things that are wont to arise from knowing oneself and reproving oneself, when an old holy man of past times was asked where one would be safer—in solitude or in company?—he replied: ‘If he knows how to reprove himself, he will be safe anywhere; and if not, he will be in danger anywhere.’”

2. ELEMENTS OF THE MORALITY OF THE HUMAN ACT

Before entering into what the Ignatian examination of conscience is, we will make some clarifications that can help us understand more clearly what is sin and what is not; and what is grave sin and what is not.

“And on the 22nd day that they were imprisoned, they were called to hear the sentence, which was that no error was found either in their life or in their doctrine; and thus they could continue doing as they had done before, teaching doctrine and speaking about the things of God, provided that they

never defined: this is mortal sin, or this is venial sin, unless four years had passed in which they had studied more. Having read this sentence, the judges showed much affection, as if they wanted it to be accepted. The pilgrim said that he would do everything the sentence commanded, but that he would not accept it; since, without condemning him of anything, they were closing his mouth so that he could not help his neighbors in what he could. And no matter how much Doctor Frías pressed, who showed himself very affected, the pilgrim said nothing more except that, insofar as he was within the jurisdiction of Salamanca, he would do what was commanded. Then they were taken out of jail, and he began to commend himself to God and to think about what he should do. And he found great difficulty in staying in Salamanca; because in order to help souls, it seemed to him that the door was closed by this prohibition of not defining mortal sin and venial sin.” (St. Ignatius)

Catechism of the Catholic Church

Upon publishing it, St. John Paul II said that it was:

“One of the greatest events in the recent history of the Church,” “a true gift,” “a gift that presents the truth revealed by God in Christ and entrusted by Him to His Church,” “a compendium of Catholic faith and morals.”

I. The sources of morality

1749 Freedom makes man a moral subject. When he acts deliberately, man is, so to speak, the father of his acts. Human acts—that is, acts freely performed after a judgment of conscience—are morally qualified: they are good or evil.

1750 The morality of human acts depends on:— the object chosen;— the end in view or the intention;— the circumstances of the action.

The object, the intention, and the circumstances constitute the “sources,” or constitutive elements, of the morality of human acts.

1751 The object chosen is a good toward which the will deliberately directs itself. It is the matter of a human act. The object chosen morally specifies the act of the will, based on whether reason recognizes and judges it to be in conformity or not with the true good. The objective rules of morality express the rational order of good and evil, attested by conscience.

1752 In contrast to the object, the intention is located on the side of the subject acting. The intention, being linked to the voluntary source of the action and determining it by reason of its end, is an essential element in the moral evaluation of the action. The end is the primary goal of the intention and indicates the objective sought in the action. Intention is a movement of the will toward an end; it looks to the goal of the act. It seeks the good expected from the action undertaken. It does not limit

itself to the direction of each of our actions taken in isolation, but can also orient several actions toward a single goal; it can direct an entire life toward the ultimate end. For example, a service rendered to someone has as its purpose helping the neighbor, but it may at the same time be inspired by the love of God as the ultimate end of all our actions. Thus, a single action may be inspired by several intentions—for example, doing a service in order to obtain a favor or to satisfy vanity.

1753 A good intention (for example, helping one's neighbor) does not make behavior that is intrinsically disordered (such as lying and slander) either good or just. The end does not justify the means. Thus, one cannot justify the condemnation of an innocent person as a legitimate means for saving the people. On the contrary, an added bad intention (such as vainglory) makes an act evil which, in itself, may be good (such as almsgiving) (cf. Mt 6:2–4).

1754 Circumstances, including consequences, are secondary elements of a moral act. They contribute to increasing or diminishing the moral goodness or malice of human acts (for example, the amount of money stolen). They can also diminish or increase the responsibility of the one acting (such as acting out of fear of death). Circumstances cannot, of themselves, change the moral quality of acts; they cannot make an action good or just if it is intrinsically evil.

II. Good acts and evil acts

1755 A morally good act requires the goodness of the object, of the end, and of the circumstances together. A bad end corrupts the action, even if its object is good in itself (such as praying and fasting to be seen by men).

The object of the choice can by itself vitiate the whole act. There exist concrete behaviors—such as fornication—which it is always wrong to choose, because their choice entails a disorder of the will, that is, a moral evil.

1756 It is therefore erroneous to judge the morality of human acts by considering only the intention that inspires them or the circumstances (environment, social pressure, coercion or need to act, etc.) which form their context. There are acts which, by themselves and in themselves, independently of circumstances and intentions, are always gravely illicit by reason of their object; for example: blasphemy and perjury, homicide and adultery. It is not permitted to do evil that good may come of it." (...)

IV. The gravity of sin: mortal and venial sin

1854 "It is necessary to evaluate sins according to their gravity. The distinction between mortal and venial sin, already perceptible in Scripture (cf. 1 Jn 5:16–17), became established in the Church's tradition. Human experience confirms it."

1855 Mortal sin destroys charity in the heart of man by a grave violation of God's law; it turns man away from God, who is his ultimate end and beatitude, by preferring an inferior good. Venial sin allows charity to remain, although it offends and wounds it.

1856 Mortal sin, which attacks in us the vital principle that is charity, necessitates a new initiative of God's mercy and a conversion of heart which usually takes place within the context of the sacrament of Reconciliation:

"When [...] the will is directed to something which is of itself contrary to charity, by which we are ordered to the ultimate end, the sin, by its very object, has reason to be mortal [...] whether against the love of God, as in blasphemy, perjury, etc., or against the love of neighbor, as in homicide, adultery, etc. [...] On the other hand, when the sinner's will is directed to something that contains a disorder in itself, but is not, however, contrary to the love of God and neighbor—such as an idle word, a superfluous laugh, etc.—such sins are venial." (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I–II, q. 88, a. 2, c.)

1857 For a sin to be mortal, three conditions are required: *"Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent."* (RP 17)

1858 Grave matter is specified by the Ten Commandments according to Jesus' response to the rich young man: "Do not kill, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and your mother" (Mk 10:19). The gravity of sins is greater or lesser: murder is more serious than theft. The dignity of the persons harmed also matters: violence against one's parents is graver than violence against a stranger.

1859 Mortal sin requires full knowledge and complete consent. It presupposes knowledge of the sinful character of the act and of its opposition to God's law. It also implies a sufficiently deliberate consent to be a personal choice. Affected ignorance and hardness of heart (cf. Mk 3:5–6; Lk 16:19–31) do not diminish but rather increase the voluntary character of the sin.

1860 Unintentional ignorance can diminish, and even excuse, the imputability of a grave fault, but it is supposed that no one is ignorant of the principles of the moral law, which are written in the conscience of every man. The impulses of the senses and the passions can also reduce the voluntary and free character of the fault, as can external pressures or pathological disturbances. The gravest sin is that which is committed by malice, by deliberate choice of evil.

1861 Mortal sin is a radical possibility of human freedom, as is also love. It entails the loss of charity and the deprivation of sanctifying grace—that is, the state of grace. If it is not redeemed by repentance and God's forgiveness, it causes exclusion from the kingdom of Christ and the eternal death of hell; thus our freedom has the power to make choices forever, without return. Nevertheless, even though we may judge that an act is in itself a grave fault, the judgment about persons must be entrusted to the justice and mercy of God.

1862 One commits a venial sin when, in a light matter, one does not observe the standard prescribed by moral law, or when one disobeys the moral law in a grave matter but without full knowledge or full consent.

1863 Venial sin weakens charity; it entails a disordered affection for created goods; it impedes the soul's progress in the exercise of virtues and the practice of moral good; it merits temporal punishment. Venial sin, when deliberate and unrepented, disposes us little by little to commit mortal sin. Nevertheless, venial sin does not break the covenant with God. It is humanly reparable with God's grace. "It does not deprive of sanctifying grace, of friendship with God, of charity, and consequently of eternal beatitude" (RP 17):

"Man, while remaining in the flesh, cannot avoid all sin, at least venial sins. But do not consider these sins, which we call venial, as a small thing: if you think them small when you weigh them, tremble when you count them. Many small things make a large mass; many drops of water fill a river. Many grains make a heap. What then is our hope? Above all, confession..." (St. Augustine, *In epistulam Iohannis ad Parthos tractatus I, 6*)

1864 "Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but blasphemy against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven" (Mk 3:29; cf. Mt 12:32; Lk 12:10). There are no limits to God's mercy, but the one who deliberately refuses to accept God's mercy through repentance rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit (cf. *DeV* 46). Such hardness can lead to final impenitence and eternal perdition.

EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE OF ST. IGNATIUS

[32] GENERAL EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE TO PURIFY AND TO CONFESS BETTER.

I presuppose that there are three thoughts in me, that is to say, one proper to me, which arises from my own freedom and will; and two others that come from outside, the one that comes from the good spirit and the other from the bad.

[33] Of THOUGHT. 1st There are two ways of meriting in the evil thought that comes from outside; for example, a thought comes to commit a mortal sin, to which thought I resist immediately⁷ and it is overcome.

[34] 2nd. The second way to merit is when that same evil thought comes to me, and I resist it, and it comes again and again, and I always resist until the thought is overcome; and this second way merits more than the first.

[35] One sins venially when the same thought of committing a mortal sin arises, and a person pays attention to it by indulging in some slight pleasure or receiving some sensual delight, or when there is negligence in dismissing such a thought.

[36] **1st.** There are two ways to commit a mortal sin: the first is when a person consents to the evil thought, either to act immediately as they have consented, or to put it into action if they could.

[37] **2nd.** The second way to commit a mortal sin is when the sin is put into action, and it is graver for three reasons: first, because of the longer duration; second, because of greater intensity; third, because of greater harm to both persons.

[38] **OF WORD.** One should not swear by the Creator or by a creature unless with truth, necessity, and reverence. By necessity, I understand not when one affirms any truth with an oath, but when it concerns something of importance for the benefit of the soul, the body, or temporal goods. By reverence, I understand that in naming the Creator and Lord, one considers and shows the due honor and respect.

[39] It should be noted that since in a vain oath we sin more by swearing by the Creator than by the creature, it is more difficult to swear properly with truth, necessity, and reverence by the creature than by the Creator, for the following reasons:

1st: When we wish to swear by some creature, in wanting to name the creature, we are not as attentive or careful to speak the truth or affirm it with necessity as when we want to name the Lord and Creator of all things.

2nd: When swearing by a creature, it is not as easy to show reverence and homage to the Creator as when swearing by and naming the Creator and Lord; for wanting to name God our Lord brings more respect and reverence than naming a created thing. Therefore, it is more fitting for the perfect to swear by a creature than for the imperfect; because the perfect, through constant contemplation and illumination of understanding, consider, meditate, and contemplate more fully that God is Lord in each creature according to its own essence, presence, and power; and so, in swearing by the creature, they are more apt and disposed to show reverence to their Creator and Lord than the imperfect.

3rd: In frequent swearing by the creature, idolatry should be feared more in the imperfect than in the perfect.

[40] One should not speak idle words, which I understand to mean words that neither benefit oneself nor another, nor are intended for such purpose. Therefore, speaking for anything that is profitable, or intending to benefit one's own or another's soul, the body, or temporal goods, is never idle; nor is it idle when someone speaks of matters outside their state, such as a religious speaking about wars or trade. But in all that has been said, there is merit in speaking properly, and sin in speaking improperly or in vain.

[41] One should not speak to defame or murmur; for if I reveal a mortal sin that is not public, I sin mortally; if venial, venially; and if a defect, I show my own defect. And if the intention is good, there are two ways one may speak of another's sin or fault:

1st way: When the sin is public, such as that of a public prostitute, a judgment given in court, or a public error that infects the souls of those with whom one interacts.

2nd way: When a hidden sin is revealed to someone to help the sinner rise, provided there are some conjectures or probable reasons that may help.

[42] **OF DEEDS.** Taking as object the Ten Commandments, the precepts of the Church, and the recommendations of superiors, anything done against any of these three, depending on the greater or lesser gravity, is a greater or lesser sin. I understand recommendations of superiors to include indulgences such as crusade bulls, peace indulgences, confessing, and receiving the Most Holy Sacrament; for one sins considerably when causing harm or acting against such pious exhortations and recommendations of elders.

4. GENERAL CONFESSION [44]

What is it? It is the confession of all the sins committed in one's life. Sometimes, a general confession is made from the last time a general confession was done, but it means confessing not only from the last confession I made, but from my entire life, including sins that have already been forgiven.

Is it obligatory? First, let us say that confession, whether general or not, is not actually obligatory more than once a year, as the Catechism of the Catholic Church states regarding the precepts or commandments of the Church:

2042: "The second precept [is] to confess mortal sins at least once a year, and in danger of death, and if one is to receive Communion."

That is what is obligatory—that is, the minimum. When one loses the grace of God, one must go to confession, even if it is not a precept of the Church. As for general confession, of course there is no obligation.

However, one must make something like a general confession **obligatorily** if one discovers that, in the past, in a confession, I knowingly and deliberately concealed a grave sin out of shame or for some reason and never clarified it in a subsequent confession. In that case, that confession was sacrilegious because I lied to God. It was invalid, and I committed one more sin, which is sacrilege, and from that

point onward, all confessions were invalid. In that case, I must confess from that moment all mortal sins up to now. If that has not happened, there is no obligation to make a general confession.

As Saint Ignatius says:

“In the general confession, for whoever voluntarily wishes to make it among many others, three benefits will be found here.”

Notice he says “**voluntarily.**” I also clarify that it is not advisable to make it if one suffers from scruples, because it would be counterproductive.

Benefits:

1st: Since someone who confesses each year is not obliged to make a general confession, by doing so there is greater benefit and merit due to the greater present sorrow for all the sins and evil inclinations of their whole life.

Sorrow is what makes confession fruitful, for by the grace that God gives me in confession, one may become holier, more in God’s grace than before having committed the sin for which I am now repentant, by the power of sorrow. It is like a spring: the more it is pressed, the more it jumps; the greater the sorrow, when I receive God’s grace, I receive even more.

The second is similar to the previous one but emphasizes more the knowledge we gain of understanding and abhorring sin and evil inclinations, etc.

“2nd: Since in such spiritual exercises one knows more inwardly the sins and their malice than at a time when a person did not devote themselves to internal matters, now gaining more knowledge and sorrow for them, there will be greater benefit and merit than before.”

Now I will read a small passage from Saint Francis de Sales in his book *Introduction to the Devout Life*:

“...I refer to a general confession of the whole life, which, although I recognize that it is not always absolutely necessary, I nevertheless consider will be extremely useful for you at the beginning; for this reason, I highly recommend it. It often happens that ordinary confessions of people leading a common and ordinary life are full of great defects, because often the preparation is deficient or nonexistent, and the required contrition is lacking; on the contrary, people usually go to confession with a tacit intention to fall again into sin, without the resolution to avoid occasions and to take the necessary means for the amendment of life; in all these cases, a general confession is necessary for the peace of the soul. Moreover, the general confession leads us to self-knowledge, provokes in us a healthy confusion about our past life, makes us admire the mercy of God, who has waited for us with such patience; it calms our hearts, relieves our spirits, excites good intentions in us, gives occasion to our

spiritual father to make the warnings most suited to our condition, and opens our hearts so that we may manifest ourselves with complete confidence in subsequent confessions. Therefore, in seeking a general renewal of our heart and a total conversion of our soul to God, to undertake the devout life, I think, O Philothea, that I am right in advising you to make this general confession.”

Saint Augustine:

“He who confesses his sins already acts with God. God accuses your sins; if you also accuse yourself, you unite with God. Man and sinner are, so to speak, two realities: when you hear of man, it is God who has made him; when you hear of the sinner, it is the man himself who has done it. Destroy what you have done so that God may save what He has done... When you begin to detest what you have done, then your good works begin because you recognize your evil works. The beginning of good works is the confession of evil works. You do the truth and come into the Light.”

The third reason Saint Ignatius gives for recommending the general confession:

“3rd: Consequently, being better confessed and disposed, one is more apt and prepared to receive the Most Holy Sacrament, whose reception not only helps to avoid falling into sin, but also to increase in grace; this general confession is best done immediately after the exercises of the first week.”

Previously, confession was not as frequent as now; that is why he refers directly to Communion, which was received only occasionally, sometimes once a year, sometimes a bit more frequently, but receiving Communion was less frequent and therefore carried greater solemnity. Since Communion is such a great grace for us, we must ensure it does not become routine.

Practically, how do we make a general confession? It helps to have done the meditation on personal sins. It is advisable to take an examination of conscience; here we provide a traditional examination of conscience, as well as the one of Saint Ignatius offered in the Exercises, which is very useful. It may help to write down notes to remember better at the moment of confession. Afterwards, one goes and tells the priest that they are making a general confession, and that is enough. (If one confesses a grave sin that has not yet been confessed, it must be clarified.)

Finally, a clarification in case one does not have access to a priest for confession for any reason:

Contrition and Attrition

Contrition is the repentance for our sins. It is divided into perfect contrition and imperfect contrition, or attrition. Perfect contrition is when I repent of the sin committed out of love for God. When one repents in this way, and as soon as one can, goes to confession, one receives God’s grace again.

This act of perfect contrition is not easy to perform; it is a grace from God. That is why one cannot rely on thinking, “Well, I sinned, but I will make an act of perfect contrition and return to God’s grace.” No, of course not. Once the sin is committed, one must seek repentance, ask God for the grace, meditate on the Passion of Christ, think of God’s love, and reflect on everything that leads to repentance for these highest and most perfect reasons. And with the condition that as soon as one can confess, one does so. In this way, one can return to God’s grace, with all the peace that brings, even amid the uncertainty of not having confessed yet—but it is far better than nothing.

Sometimes, when one goes to confession, one is already in God’s grace because of this. This applies in any life circumstance: if I am about to die and there is no priest, or if I see another person about to die and no priest is available, I can urge them to repent of their sins, even as a layperson, and help them die in God’s grace, assisting them in a good death.

Also, in extreme situations, and if there is a serious reason, one can access Communion with an act of perfect contrition, but always on the condition of confessing as soon as possible. If, when one is able to confess, one does not, then the act of contrition is invalid. Therefore, there must be a circumstance of some gravity. If I am not in God’s grace and cannot confess, I must offer to the Lord the sorrow of being unable to receive sacramental Communion, make a spiritual Communion, and wait for the moment I can confess.

Imperfect contrition, or attrition, is repentance not for the highest and noblest reasons, but out of fear of condemnation. It is not a bad sorrow, but it is imperfect. This type of repentance by itself does not restore God’s grace. It absolutely requires confession. That is why one must always strive to achieve perfect contrition, but it is not easy, and one can never be fully certain that it has been achieved; therefore, confession is always necessary.

Contrition in the Catechism:

1451: Among the acts of the penitent, contrition comes first. It is “sorrow of the soul and detestation of the sin committed, with the resolution not to sin again.”

1452: When it springs from the love of God above all else, contrition is called “perfect contrition” (contrition of charity). Such contrition forgives venial sins; it also obtains the forgiveness of mortal sins if it includes a firm resolution to go to sacramental confession as soon as possible.

1453: The contrition called “imperfect” (or “attrition”) is also a gift from God, an impulse of the Holy Spirit. It arises from the consideration of the ugliness of sin or from fear of eternal condemnation and other punishments threatened to the sinner. Such a stirring of conscience can be the beginning of an inner evolution that, under the action of grace, culminates in sacramental absolution. However, by itself, imperfect contrition does not attain the forgiveness of grave sins, but it disposes the soul to obtain it in the sacrament of Penance.

One day before the battle at Pamplona, where it was foreseeable that he might lose his life—on May 19, 1521, Pentecost—Saint Ignatius of Loyola, probably without a priest available, confessed his sins to a fellow soldier. This is something that Hernando de Talavera, confessor of Queen Isabella the Catholic, the great priest, Saint Thomas Aquinas, and others recommended doing when a priest was unavailable and there was a specific danger. Why? Because, obviously, it is not a sacramental confession, but it helps: first, through the act of humility one performs, and second, if one does not yet have perfect contrition, this act of humility can obtain from God the grace of perfect contrition, allowing one to return to God's grace.

Saint Paul tells us in his Second Letter to the Corinthians:

“Be reconciled to God” (2 Cor 5:20).

This is the grace we ask of the Blessed Virgin Mary, our Mother in Heaven: that we allow ourselves to be reconciled with God and make a good confession with all the peace that comes to the soul. Confession is an enormous grace, a truly magnificent gift. It is such a great gift from God, and we Catholics are the only ones who possess it. The rules for sanctifying ourselves are given by Our Lord Jesus Christ. He was the one who told the apostles:

“Whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose you retain are retained” (Jn 20:22-23).

But beyond that, there is also a psychological aspect. God knows us perfectly, and we need to express what is inside, we need a human being to listen, and to hear that God gives us forgiveness. Indeed, in confession, the priest is God's judge: he must discern whether one is truly repentant. Those who confess directly to God, as people outside our faith do, never have the certainty of being well-disposed. That is why God gives us this great gift of sacramental confession.

Jagot, a university psychology professor in the United States, asked: “Who here is Catholic?” Some raised their hands. He said: “Well, look, I am not Catholic, but I advise you as a psychologist that since you have confession, you should make use of it. As a psychologist, I know nothing that brings as much peace to the soul as a properly made Catholic confession.”

Let us ask Mary, our Mother, for this grace: to make the most of a good confession, so that we may continue to benefit fruitfully from these holy exercises.