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U.I.O.G.D.

Ave Maria!

Jesus, Mary, Joseph, we love You, save souls
O God come to our assistance. Jesus, Mary, Joseph please make haste to help us!

+ + + Jesus, Mary, Joseph + + +

VOL. 2 = The Penitent Christian

ELEVENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

The Nature of the Examen of Conscience

“He hath made both the deaf to hear and the dumb to speak.” Mark 7:37

After the light of the Holy Ghost has been implored by fervent prayer, the next requisite for a good confession is the examen of conscience, or the effort to find out what sins we have committed. As many confessions are not made properly because of a lack of this requisite, remember, my brethren,

- I. *That he who wishes to make a good confession must examine his conscience himself; and*
- II. *That he who wishes to make a good confession must examine his conscience with proper diligence and care.*

I. He who wishes to make a good confession must examine his conscience. This is required by the nature and essentials of the Sacrament of Penance, which has been instituted by our Lord as a kind of judgment. In civil courts of justice, no one is questioned unless he has been caught in the act of committing a crime, or has been accused by someone else. Otherwise, the accused need not confess his guilt. Nay, he can deny it unless it is proved against him. It is quite different with the Sacrament of Penance; the criminal must accuse himself, without being questioned, or having his crime proved against him. Of his own free will, he must make known his own evil deeds. He is at the same time the criminal, the accuser, and the witness. The judge who sits in the holy tribunal in the place of God, has to pronounce sentence only on what he learns from the penitent's self-accusation. How can a man accuse himself, when he does not know of what he has been guilty? And how can he know that, unless he has thought of, and examined into, and remembered what he has done against the law of God? From this, it is evident, that they act very wrongly and foolishly who rush into the confessional without any preparation, trusting solely to the questions of the confessor. Would it not be a foolish thing for you to accuse a man in judgment, saying to the judge: This man has committed a great crime; but you must ask me what he has done? What could you expect as the result of an accusation of that kind? Still more unreasonable is your conduct when you go to confession, and say to the priest: Father, I have sinned; please question me. You yourself must declare in what and how often you have sinned. The priest is not sitting there to ask you questions, but to hear what you have to say against yourself. He is not sitting there to accuse you, but to judge you according to the sins you confess to him; and, if you are worthy, to give you absolution from them.

It may sometimes occur that through weakness, or illness, or stupidity, or simplicity, one cannot undertake the examen of conscience, or knows not how to set about it. In a case of that kind, charity obliges the confessor to help his penitent as far as possible, and to supply for his incapacity by asking him questions. But God does not require much in the way of examination from people of the kind; and therefore, theologians say that it is enough for an ignorant, uneducated man, who cannot recollect anything particular, to excite himself to sorrow for all his past sins, and to be prepared, when he enters the confessional, to answer all the questions put to him by the confessor, and to declare honestly what has been his condition, occupation, and mode of life hitherto. But when a man has common sense enough in matters relating to his family, or business concerns, and can remember the good or the evil that others have done him, if he were to pretend ignorance or forgetfulness in what concerns the all-important business of his soul, and to say: I cannot remember anything; Father, please question me; such conduct would be nothing but willful carelessness and he would not fulfill the commandment of God, which St. Paul makes known to us in the words: "Let a man prove himself" (I Cor. 11:28), that is, let a man examine his own conscience.

Besides, it is a well-known and undoubted necessity that one should confess all his sins (that is to say, all his mortal sins that have not yet been properly confessed), declaring their number, along with the circumstances that notably aggravate their guilt, or at least those circumstances that change their nature. If even one of them is omitted through culpable ignorance or willful negligence, the confession and the absolution are null and void. But how can you reasonably expect to escape the danger of making an invalid confession, if you do not examine your conscience, but leave the whole matter to your confessor? Must he guess what you have done against the commandments of God, and how often and how grievously you have sinned? Do you wish to act like King Nabuchodonosor, who expected his sooth-sayers to tell him what he had dreamt? "I have dreamed a dream," he said to them, "and am troubled in mind and know not what I dreamed... therefore tell me the dream and the interpretation thereof" (Dan. 2:3, 6). A ridiculous thing certainly for the king to ask, and therefore the sooth-sayers said to him: "Let the king tell his servants the dream, and we will declare the interpretation of it" (Dan. 2).

I have sinned, you say to your confessor: Father, please question me. And what is he to question you about? How does he know what you have done? Has he seen your thoughts during the week, month, quarter, or half year that has elapsed since your last confession? Has he heard all you have said during that time at home and in company? Has he been here, there, and everywhere with you, like the omnipresent God himself? Generally speaking, he does not even know who you are; he has never been in company with you, and perhaps has never seen you before. And remember well, it is not enough merely to go through the commandments of God and of the Church; but each one has to pay particular attention to his state and occupation, because, generally speaking, there is a difference between the sins committed by married people and those who are unmarried; by masters and mistresses, and by servants; by officials and superiors, and by subjects and inferiors; by merchants and shop-keepers, and by tradesmen and laborers; by citizens in the town, and by peasants in the country. The different states of life have their separate duties and obligations, and their separate dangers and occasions of sin. But how can one who knows nothing whatever of your affairs guess at, or find out by questions, what you have in the depths of your conscience? You have quite enough to do to find out all about it yourself, and to get a clear idea of what you have done against God and your neighbor in thought, desire, word, and deed. How, then, can you imagine that you will be able, when your confessor asks you one or two questions, to remember at once all those circumstances of place, time, opportunity, and company, so as to answer the questions properly, and say with certainty, yes, I have done that; no, I have not done that; I have committed that sin so and so often? Even if you are asked a hundred questions, and have given a hundred answers, how can you trust to those answers, which must be very uncertain, for the validity of the absolution you expect to receive? Are you not thus running the risk of nullifying the holy Sacrament of Penance, and dishonoring it by a grievous sacrilege? If you leave out a mortal sin, and it is hardly to be expected that you should not under the circumstances, whose fault is it? Your own; because you did not examine your conscience as you should have done; and your ignorance is the result of a culpable negligence, which will not excuse you before God. Therefore one should examine his conscience before confession; and, as the forgiveness of sin depends on it, this examination must not be made lightly and in a superficial manner, but

II. *With due care and diligence.*

No general rule can be laid down with regard to the amount of time and care that are to be employed in the examination of conscience before confession; for penitents differ widely in their conditions and capabilities, and some require more time and care than others. According to circumstances each one must employ what can be called, in the general acceptation of the term, a reasonable diligence. The Council of Trent says distinctly that diligence should be used in the examen of conscience; “all mortal sins that one finds on his conscience after a diligent examination must be declared in confession.” And farther on, speaking of the obligation of confessing all mortal sins, it says, “which occur to the memory after due and diligent reflection.” But the Council does not specify the amount of time or diligence required.

The safest rule to follow, is, for one to employ as much time and diligence, according to his state of life, as all sensible people would employ in any other matter of great importance. To make this clearer, I will explain it by a simile. You have an important account to render in which there is question of a large sum of money. If you give in your accounts every week or fortnight regularly, the matter is easy enough, and does not require much trouble on your part. All you have to do, is to look at your account-book, and you will see it all at a glance. But if it is many months, or even years, since you squared up your reckoning, and if, moreover, you have allowed things to get into disorder through carelessness; or, if you have otherwise been prevented from keeping your books properly, and if, at the same time, the master who demands the account is a very exact and careful man, who holds all your interests completely in his hands, how would you act? Would you think an hour or even a whole day too much to spend in putting the matter into order? My opinion is, that whole weeks and months would hardly seem long enough to you; and meanwhile, you would give up all other business, and would tell your servant not to allow any one to interrupt you. In a word, you would strain all your powers of memory and understanding to set matters right, especially if your master kept on urging you, in the words of the rich man in the Gospel: “Give an account of thy stewardship” (Luke 16:2). So it is with you, O sinner, when you are preparing for confession. You are about to undertake a great business on which the happiness of your soul for all eternity depends, and if you make a grievous and culpable error in your accounts, you will certainly be ruined. Is this matter perhaps of less importance to you than your temporal and transitory prosperity? Are not worldly goods worth less than nothing when compared to the treasures of your immortal soul? He who demands the account from you is the great God himself. Is he, perhaps, less experienced in his own affairs, less exacting in his claims, less just and powerful in His punishments, than a mere mortal? Hear what he says of himself by the Psalmist: “The searcher of hearts and reins is God” (Ps. 7:10). “I will search Jerusalem with lamps” (Soph. 1:12).

Are your accounts clear, correct, and in good order? If so, then you need not be afraid. You need not spend much time, nor be too scrupulous in examining your conscience before confession. If you happen to commit a mortal sin, there is no danger of your forgetting it. As to venial sins, you are not bound to tell them in confession; so that, even if you forget them by the thousand, or deliberately refuse to mention them, that does not interfere with the validity of your confession. All you have to do is to mention some sin of your past life, for which you can excite yourself to sorrow, and your confession is valid; your account is approved of by the almighty God, who signs it by giving you the grace of the Sacrament. There are many who make a great mistake, and cause themselves unnecessary anxiety by the useless trouble they take in the examination of their consciences, so that they turn the confessional into a rack to torture their souls, and make the sweet burden of Jesus Christ insupportable. These people, although they cannot remember having committed any mortal sin since their last confession (and they go regularly and frequently during the month), yet spend half and even whole hours sometimes thinking of what they will say. They make sins where there is no sin at all, and they doubt about everything. The more they try to examine their consciences, the more disturbed they become; and at last, they are obliged to acknowledge that, after having spent hours in all sorts of distractions and fancies, they are just as wise as before, and have not learned anything about the state of their consciences. The most useful, necessary, and excellent preparation for confession is a lively faith, a great hope and confidence in God, a true sorrow for sin, a firm purpose of amendment, a careful examination and selection of the means and manner in which one may lead a better life, lessen one’s daily faults, serve God with more zeal, do more good works, and have more will to do them. That is what most of the time should be spent in.

Are you one of those whose accounts are not in order? One of those tepid Christians, who sin by wholesale, and lead careless lives; who pay little attention to their souls, go to confession one, two, three, or four times a

year, and meanwhile commit sin whenever the occasion offers, without much hesitation; allow full liberty to eyes, ears, tongues, hands, thoughts, and desires; seldom or never examine their consciences; easily forget their sins, and the number and circumstances of them; or, if they go to confession every month, commit sins that are of a peculiarly dangerous character, and are likely to be the occasion of more sin; such as a long-continued habit of this or that vice, in which they show no signs of amendment from one confession to another; sins of injustice, scandal, detraction, vindictiveness, and enmity; habitual drunkenness; continual dissensions between married people or neighbors, all of which can be the occasion of many sins to others; an impure attachment to a certain person, which places one in the proximate occasion of sin, and gives rise to thousands of sinful thoughts, desires, words, and deeds, by day and night. Are you, I say, one of those people? If so, then it alters the question altogether. You, and such as you, require a far longer time, and much more care and diligence in examining your conscience before confession, in order to satisfy your obligation and to square your accounts with God. Would you think a whole day too much to spend in bringing such an account as yours into order? But what do I say? A day? You will not even spend an hour in it; you sit in the church for a quarter of an hour or so, and go through the commandments of God in a kind of a way, go into the confessional when your turn comes, rattle off a dozen mortal sins more or less, and then expect to get absolution. How is it possible for you, in such a short time, to have a clear knowledge of the many sins you have committed in thought, word, and deed? But if you have forgotten some and do not tell them, do you think that your forgetfulness will excuse you before your Judge? I, for my part, do not think so; for your laziness is your own fault, and your confession and repentance are worth nothing. Therefore, you must spend more time in the examen of conscience, and must employ an amount of diligence proportionate to your state and occupation and to the nature of your sins.

The penitent David says: "And I meditated in the night with my own heart, and I was exercised, and I swept my spirit" (Ps. 76:7). What do you do, when you wish to sweep out your room, so as to have it perfectly clean? You go through every corner of it; you put all the chairs and tables to one side, and move the furniture, so that no dust may remain concealed behind it. So must you act, sinner, if you wish to do sincere penance. Enter the chamber of your conscience; seek out all its hidden recesses; examine, as far as you can, all your thoughts, desires, words, and actions, to see if you can detect a mortal sin in any of them. Move all the chairs and tables; that is: consider the habits, business, and occupations that engage your attention from morning till night, the places and houses you frequent, the company you keep, the obligations of your state, and how you have fulfilled them, so as to see whether and how often you have sinned against God and your neighbor, and what effects, injury, or scandal have followed from those sins, which you foresaw and could easily have prevented. If, on account of a long-continued habit of a certain vice, or the occasions in which you are placed, you cannot find out the exact number of times you have sinned, then, try to recollect how long you have been addicted to that vice, and how often you fell into sin probably during the day. Above all, call upon God for light and help. Say, with the penitent David: "Who can understand sins?" (Ibid. 18:13.) I have sinned, O Lord; I have sinned grievously; I have sinned often but how can I find out the number and nature of my sins, unless thou comest to the assistance of my memory! "O my God, enlighten my darkness" (Ibid. 17:29). Thou hast numbered all my steps, and hast written down all the movements of my heart; enlighten then my understanding, that I may know all my sins, repent of them, confess them properly, and not commit them again. In that way, you will make a good examen before confession, and even if a mortal sin should escape your memory, or you cannot say the exact number of times you have sinned, your forgetfulness will then be inculpable, and will not be attributed to you, so that you will be validly absolved from all your sins. Amen.

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