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JMJ

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 + + +

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TWELFTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Candor in the Examen of Conscience

“Seeing him, passed by.” St. Luke 10:31.

As the priest and the Levite acted in the parable of today’s Gospel, so do many sinners act nowadays when they wish to purify their souls in the Sacrament of Penance. Those sinful souls are represented by the poor traveler who fell into the hands of robbers. But, while that poor man could not heal himself, while he had to trust to the charity of another for his cure, the sinner must heal himself in the Sacrament of Penance with the help of God. Yet, I repeat, he acts sometimes like the hard-hearted priest in the Gospel, who, “seeing him, passed by,” and went on his way, without doing anything for the unfortunate man who was lying half dead and covered with wounds. It is in the examination of their consciences especially, that sinners are guilty of imitating the conduct of the priest; they look at their sins in a superficial manner, and thus pass over many mortal wounds. But there is another fault, which is the occasion of many sins being passed over, and that is a want of candor in the examen of conscience. This fault is committed

- I. By scrupulous souls who look on themselves as more guilty than they really are; and*
- II. by more culpable souls who regard themselves as more innocent than they really are.*

I. In a court of justice both the judge and the accuser must be on their guard against calumniating the accused. They must not impute to him, through falsehood and malice, a crime of which he is innocent; nor must they accuse him on mere suspicion and without sufficient proof; nor have recourse to false arguments to make a minor crime appear greater than it is, and deserving of death. For if mere suspicion, envy, falsehood, and malice were allowed to influence a judge, then every honest man might be condemned as a malefactor. The same care, candor, and honesty must be used in the examination of our consciences before confession; for the sinner is then his own accuser. You must therefore be on your guard, O sinners, against wronging yourself, or accusing yourself falsely of sin, through fear, anxiety, unfounded doubts, or mere suspicion; nor must you make great sins of small ones, nor certain of doubtful ones, lest you should accuse yourself to your judge of crimes of which you are not guilty. “I was exercised, and I swept my spirit” (Ps. 76:7) says David of himself. “Swept,” means in the Hebrew, “I looked at myself” and its signification here is, “I looked at myself in my spirit.” This simile is admirably suited to our subject; for when you are trying to recollect your sins, your conscience must resemble a mirror, which represents all objects that are held before it as neither greater, nor smaller, nor uglier, nor more beautiful, than they are in themselves. There are mirrors so made as to represent the object in different

colors, although the latter may be snow-white; mirrors that are cut in such a way as to multiply the object, so that, when one looks into them, he sees himself twenty, thirty, or fifty times; mirrors that make the object much greater than it really is, so that, when you look at yourself in them, you appear to be a monster, your head is like a giant's, your elbows are like trees, your eyes like two large globes; in a word, they make you appear a monster, although you are not in reality a whit altered in stature. It seems, to me that many, especially pious and conscientious Christians, stand before mirrors of that kind when they are making the examen of conscience before confession; their consciences are of such a nature that they make what is good appear bad, what is small, great, and what is only one they multiply indefinitely in number.

There are those who, when they have done anything, no matter what, without the least thought or suspicion of sin, and hear afterwards, in a sermon or elsewhere, that it is unlawful, become at once troubled and anxious. Alas, they say to themselves, what have I been doing all this time? And I never even confessed it. What am I to do? Thus, they at once condemn themselves of sin, although they are perfectly innocent, and consider themselves bound to declare it in their next confession. But what are you thinking of? You are guilty of calumniating and detracting yourself; but even if what you did were the greatest sin in the world, you did it through invincible ignorance, since you had no suspicion at the time that it was unlawful; and therefore, you are not guilty, because what is done with a good conscience cannot be afterwards made bad by any subsequent knowledge one gains regarding it. Hence, it is not matter for confession. But, if you are nevertheless bent on accusing yourself of it, which is quite unnecessary, and is a waste of precious time, then, at least, you ought to add (and you are bound in conscience to add) that you did it with a good conscience, so that the judge, who is sitting there in the place of the almighty God, may not look on you as guilty of a sin of which you are innocent, and may not be deceived in his judgment about you by yourself.

2. There are scrupulous people who are incapable of forming a sound opinion in those matters concerning which they are scrupulous. If, when preparing for confession, they look over the Ten Commandments, or the table of sins in their prayer-books, they think they are guilty of every one of them, although there is not the least foundation for a supposition of the kind; and, brooding over their fancied guilt, they fix it firmly in their imagination, until at last they look on it as an undoubted fact.

3. The third class consists of those who make mountains out of mole-hills, and mortal sins out of venial, certainties out of doubts, and even vices out of virtues. They look on all impure thoughts that come into their heads, even against their will, as so many mortal sins; every thought against faith, although they reject it at once, they put down immediately as a sin of heresy; a want of confidence in God they consider blasphemy; a suspicion against their neighbor, as a rash judgment, and every feeling of vexation in their daily crosses, as impatience and despair. The more they brood over those things, the more do they become persuaded that they are guilty; and as there is no counting the thoughts that come into their heads, so it seems to them that their sins are beyond numbering. Like people who blind themselves by looking too long at the sun, they make themselves almost incapable of looking at the matter in a reasonable light. Scrupulous people of that kind, since they cannot form a sound judgment of their own actions, must spend a very short time in the examen of conscience, and, should never accuse themselves of mortal sin, unless they are infallibly certain, without any previous examen of conscience, that they have really committed a willful, deliberate, grievous sin. Nay, so certain must they be of their guilt, that they must be prepared to swear to it, if necessary, before God and the priest. If they refuse to do that, all the mortal sins they accuse themselves of are mere imagination. Therefore, whenever a doubt occurs to them as to whether they have done this or that, or consented to bad thoughts or not, they can and must, without further examination, at once conclude they are not guilty, and reject all their anxious doubts as mere nonsense, because the devil seeks, by means of those doubts, to disturb their minds and to prevent them from having real devotion. There is only one cure for such scrupulous people, and that is, that they always go to the one confessor, who must be an experienced man, and obey his directions blindly and humbly. If they refuse to do that, there is no help for them in their misery. So much for those who, through excessive anxiety, make themselves out to be more guilty than they really are. But I fear that the number of the other class of penitents is much greater, namely, of those who, through carelessness of their salvation, when examining their consciences, *look on themselves as more innocent than they really are in the sight of God. Thereby, they run the risk of never making a good confession, and so expose their souls to the greatest danger.*

II. Just as there are mirrors which make small things appear great, and beautiful things ugly, so there are others made in such a way as to diminish what is really large, and to minimize deformities. Again, no matter how good and true a mirror is in itself, if you go too close to it, so as to breathe on it, you will darken it, so that you will not be able to see anything. The consciences of many sinners, when they are preparing for confession, are like those mirrors. They look on grievous sins as venial, and on venial sins as no sins at all. They approach too close, so that they see their sins only darkly; that is, they argue too much with their consciences, seeking all sorts of pretexts to excuse themselves from certain sins, until at last they persuade themselves that there is no harm in them.

1. These are, first, sinners whose consciences are callous, so that they do not feel the sins they commit, unless they do something very bad in outward act. These people examine themselves only on the actions they do against the Commandments. They make nothing of thoughts and desires, of secret pleasure, of looks and words, and do not even count them as sins, although in reality they may be grievously sinful, especially in the matter of impurity, or hatred and revenge, even before any outward act is committed. But such people trouble themselves little about that. As long as they cannot satisfy their bad desires (either through want of opportunity, or because they have changed their intention), they consider that they are free from sin; or else, if they do take notice of such thoughts, they seek to excuse themselves by saying that they had no bad intention. But what a lame excuse that is! To entertain impure thoughts for instance, deliberately, and willfully to adhere to them, if only for an instant, knowing them to be evil, is already a mortal sin, no matter whether there is or is not the intention of doing an unlawful action.

2. There are others whose evil inclinations and desires blindfold their consciences, so that they now and then cannot see or acknowledge their sins and the malice of them; and this is especially the case in sins of habit, or in vices to which they are much attached. For instance, a man thinks of nothing all the day long but how he may make some temporal profit, so as to become rich; he does not trouble himself to ask whether the means he makes use of to that end are lawful or not; as long as he can make the profit, he is satisfied. Another centers his thoughts altogether on pleasure; he is always trying to satisfy his sensuality, and he takes it for granted that whatever helps him to this end is lawful enough. He frequents all sorts of company without the least scruple; he laughs, jokes, and amuses himself with persons of the opposite sex, whenever opportunity offers, and he allows full liberty to eyes, ears, hands, and tongue. Now in all this, there is evidently danger of sins of all kinds; nay, humanly speaking, it must be that he offends God in different ways. When it comes to the examen of conscience before confession, these people close their eyes to all these sins. They do not look into the mirror properly, lest they should see too clearly. They do not want to awaken the worm of conscience, and be disturbed in their pleasures by its gnawings.

3. The third class consists of those who, as it were, hang up a curtain before their consciences, that they may not see and have to acknowledge themselves guilty of certain sins. A doubt (and that, too, not always an unfounded one), occurs to them sometimes, as to whether their mode of life, of dress, of behavior in company, is quite in accordance with the law of Jesus Christ or not; and then, the custom of the world comes in most conveniently as a curtain with which to hide the whole affair, so as to keep their conscience quiet about it, "A sinful man shall flee reproof, and will find an excuse according to his will" (Ecclus. 32:20); that is, he will try to excuse what he wishes to excuse. But what excuse will he find? Will he try to compare himself with just and pious men? No; for their lives would condemn him. He compares himself rather with those who resemble himself, and who follow the vain customs of the world. The Gospel, and even his own uneasy conscience call out to him, if he will but hear it: This or that is not lawful; it goes directly against the principles of the Gospel of Christ. And what answer does he make? Oh, he says, others do the same; it is the custom of the world! This or that confessor does not look on it as a sin. Other confessors say nothing whatever about it; there can be no great harm in it, therefore. Thus, they throw a veil over their consciences and, when examining themselves before confession, do not even think of looking into those matters. They continue to go with many others along the road which worldly vanity, in direct opposition to the Christian law, has made for them. But, you who act in this manner, wait till you come to the end of that road; you will find that it leads to a quarter, where many like you have already gone. The door by which the chosen children of God enter heaven is, you must know, very small and narrow. Many, indeed, are called to enter thereat, but few will be admitted; "few there are that find it" (St. Matthew 7:14). When your Judge shall demand a strict account from you, bring forward your excuse, "Others

did the same; it was the common custom in the world,” and see what it will profit you. The question will then be, not what others have done, but what you yourself have done; not how others have lived, but how you yourself should have lived with others. “Thou shalt not follow the multitude to do evil; neither shalt thou yield in judgment to the opinion of the most part, to stray from the truth” (Exod. 23:2). Will you, then, lose your soul for the sake of others, who also lose theirs?

4. There is another class of penitents who do not find out all their sins when preparing for confession, because they look only at one half of themselves in the glass. They are like one who holds a mirror so that he can see into it with only one eye; thus the half of his face is hidden from him, nor has he any idea of what it is like. They first examine how they have offended God in thought, word, or deed, since their last confession; but they never think of seeing how they have fulfilled the duties and obligations of their state of life, so that they often leave out grievous sins, which they could and should have known. A pious and zealous priest, hearing once the confession of a great emperor, said to him: “I have now heard the *sins of Charles*; let me hear *those of the Emperor also*.”

Husbands, wives, fathers, and mothers of families, you have finished your examen of conscience, have you not? But I am afraid that many sins, which you should have thought of, first of all, have escaped your memories. How have you observed the mutual obligations of your state? What care have you bestowed on the spiritual welfare of those subject to you? How have you looked after your children? Are you training them properly, and sending them to catechism and to sermons? Are you watchful over all their actions, so that you know where they go, whom they speak to, what company they keep, how they live, and whether they fear and love God? What example do you give them? What do they see in you and hear from you during the day?

How do you look after their temporal wants? Do you squander in drinking or gambling, in useless entertainments, or in dressing above your state, what you should spend on them? Do you keep them busy at some work befitting their state, or do you allow them to spend the day in idleness? Do you permit them to go to parties in which their precious souls can easily be exposed to danger? Do you give proper food and wages to your servants and laborers? All these things belong to the examen of conscience. But the obligations of particular states of life are seldom brought before the mirror; the sins committed against them are hidden in the depths of conscience; they are rarely made the subject of serious consideration, and therefore the accusation in confession is incomplete.

Further, people, generally speaking, examine the sins they have committed themselves. But what about the sins of others which you have occasioned or might have occasioned by impure conversation, by indecent signs and laughter, by immodesty in dress, by keeping improper pictures or statues in your houses or gardens, and thus running the risk of exciting impure desires and thoughts in the minds of those who see them; by selling, lending, or borrowing impure books and love-tales, that are liable to put bad thoughts into the minds of those who read them; and by any immodesty in dress; by urging others to excessive drinking; by giving bad advice or encouraging others to sin; by doing a sinful act in presence of others; by cursing or swearing before children, and so teaching them that hellish language? These are the sins from which David so often prayed to be delivered: “From those,” the sins “of others spare thy servant” (Ps. 18:14).

Finally, it is not enough to examine yourself on what you yourself have done to offend God, and on what you have caused others to do; you must not forget also to give an account of what you have left undone. For instance, you could and should have given your neighbor here and there a friendly warning, have kept him away from evil, urged him to good, or prevented him from doing or saying something sinful; but you have not done so. You had now and then an opportunity of saluting in a friendly manner, or doing a service to a person who had injured you, but through hatred, you did not avail yourself of it. You could have paid your debts at the proper time, or have given your laborers the wages due to them, or have made restitution of ill-gotten goods; but you did not do so. You might have given alms to the poor and needy according to your means, and have practiced the works of Christian charity towards your neighbor; but you neglected doing so through avarice or sloth. These are the omissions that Jesus Christ will bring forward, on that last terrible day, against the wicked: “For I was hungry, and you gave me not to eat” (St. Matthew 25:42).

Ah, what a fearful number of sins thus remain hidden in the conscience, because, through carelessness and culpable ignorance, people wish to know nothing about them! They look in the glass with but one eye. To many penitents one might say with truth what a doctor once said to a young man who showed him a small sore on his

finger, and complained of the pain it caused him “Ah, my friend,” said the doctor, who knew by the color and the pulse of his patient that the latter was suffering from a dangerous illness, “the evil is not in your finger alone; the chief cause of your suffering is hidden from you; your blood must be purified and your stomach put into order, or else we shall soon have to carry you to the grave.” In the same way, there are many who come to the spiritual physician and show him some trifling sores that trouble them; that is, they confess merely their daily faults. But if the priest could see into their consciences, might he not say to each of them: “Poor soul! Your evil does not consist merely in what you have told me! What you have kept back, and concealed from yourself, will be the cause of eternal death to you, unless you repent of, and confess it! “Son of man,” said the Lord to the prophet Ezechiel, “dig in the wall” (8:8). “Go in and see the wicked abominations which they commit here” (Ibid. 9). My child, the priest might say, “dig in the wall,” examine the hidden recesses of your conscience, and there you will find a mass of sins that you have not wished to see hitherto. You will see many sins of your own, which have been hitherto concealed from your eyes by an inordinate love of creatures, by your evil desires, and by all sorts of empty pretexts and excuses. You will see many sins of which you were the occasion to others by the scandal you gave them. You will see many omissions of the good that you were bound to do. Do you think, perhaps, that in the Day of Judgment you will be able to justify yourself from all these by saying: “I have not known anything about those sins; I did not think that this or that was a grievous sin; I did not look on it as necessary to examine my conscience about those things? “You did not wish to know,” will be the answer of your Judge: “you did not wish to acknowledge your misdeeds; you have not examined your conscience with candor; your ignorance was willful and culpable; true, your confessor, either because he knew nothing of your secret transgressions, or had not the courage to warn you about them, has often pronounced over you the words, ‘I absolve thee from thy sins;’ but I, who know the secrets of the heart, and search the reins, I said at the same time, ‘I condemn thee on account of thy sins.’”

But before it comes to that with us, let us in future, whenever we go to confession, act with candor in the examen of conscience. What is the advantage of deceiving ourselves in a matter which so closely concerns our eternal salvation? What is the good of trying to make ourselves appear more innocent than we really are in the sight of God? Let each one, when he is examining his conscience, act as if he were making an inquiry against a stranger, nay, against his greatest enemy; so that he may pass over nothing, and excuse nothing that he can with truth bring against himself. Let us say with David: “The sins of my youth and my ignorances do not remember” (Ps. 24:7). “From my secret ones cleanse me, O Lord, and from those of others, spare thy servant” (Ibid. 18:13, 14). Pardon the sins of which I have in any way been the occasion, by scandal-giving. “Send forth thy light and thy truth” (Ibid. 42:3). Enlighten me with thy light that I may know all the sins of my past life, repent of them with all my heart, confess them properly, do penance for them, avoid them in future, and love, praise, and serve thee with all the greater fervor. Amen.

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