

## Lent VI

In this strange time of the suspension of public Masses and just about everything else that is public, it may strike you as odd to be concerned about the predominant fault. Yet this time is nothing short of a tremendous opportunity to hit the fault right where it counts. And if you want to do this, please dear reader, believe that Almighty God was ready yesterday to give you the graces you need to accomplish this hit.

Of the many means we can use to do this great and necessary work, I've mentioned but a few, but would like to add one sure-fire way to go at this, which is the examination of conscience. This rather neglected treasure is part of every Mass, in whatever form it takes. And at Night Prayer or Compline, the Divine Office requires an examination of conscience. The calling to mind of our sins is essential to rid ourselves of anything which can interfere with worshipping God in spirit and in truth.

Conscience is from the Latin, literally "with knowledge." So if I'm tempted to take something from the store without paying, I might hear the whisper of someone quoting the Seventh Commandment. It might be an unspoken whisper of "Do not do this thing." God forbid we ignore it, since St. John Henry Newman called conscience "The voice of God in the soul."

So how do we make a good examination of conscience? First, try to understand that it should not be a self-interrogation from you as prosecutor. A courtroom approach to this can result in scrupulosity or discouragement. And keep in mind that discouragement is one of the primary things if not the number one thing our enemy seeks to accomplish. On the other hand, we don't want to make it a time of self-congratulation which results in little more than "I feel good about me."

Second, try to make the examination a conversation with God; in other words, a prayer. This avoids the problem of moralism, where we act only because of a rule, not because of God, Who is three *Persons*. In this conversation, we try to **remember**. This too is a Latin word, which literally means to reinsert something in the mind or heart that has slipped away. With that being said, here are a few practical points on making a good exam:

1. Like a child who looks back to make sure mom or dad is watching, put yourself in the presence of God at first. As the child will take comfort in knowing that dad is watching him jump into the two feet of water, so God is a loving Father and is keenly interested in what you have to say.
2. Since this is a conversation, allow God to do some of the talking, if not all of it. He will remind you of His mercy which He extended even to Judas Iscariot.
3. Tell Him how the day went (notice that in the Office the exam is done during Compline). This ought to include not only what went wrong (an occasion of sorrow), but also what went right (an occasion of gratitude). When we have a good notion of what went right, that is an antidote to discouragement, since it allows us to see God's grace working in our lives. When we see what went wrong, that's a time to take responsibility for our actions and blame no one else.

If you need material to help you with the exam, there are plenty of examinations around in good prayer books, or that can be found on line. But if you regularly make the exam, you'll find little need for these lists.

4. Turn the sins into a sacrifice. Unfortunately the only things we have to give God that are 100% ours, is our sins. Offer them in a spiritual holocaust. Drown them in the waters of Baptism.

5. Make a plan. Any good debriefing after action should come up with an idea of what we can do that is different. St. Ignatius of Loyola thought it was very appropriate for beginners to write down each day or week, the number of times they yielded to the predominant fault, and the number of times they resisted it. Keeping track of the progress can give real encouragement.

We can also give ourselves a sanction. For each yielding to the fault, we'll be wise if we don't delay to make some penance. For example, if blasphemy is the fault, get a glass jar and fine yourself some coin or coins, and then if the jar fills, give the money to your parish or to some charity. I suppose a psychologist would call this behavior modification, but I write this because I know it works.

6. The amount of time the exam takes can be short, if it is regular. During the Office, it's about the amount of time to say one *Pater noster*.

This is the fight of our lives. We'll be tempted to be uncourageous; tempted to think that we will never be able to overcome the predominant fault. But may we not make any kind of peace with our fault, which would mean to abandon the interior life altogether. Instead, since God has commanded us to be perfect, it must be possible to do this *with His grace*.

As St. Augustine wrote: "God never commands the impossible, but, in giving us His precepts, He commands us to do what we can, and ask for the Grace to do what we cannot."