All My Liberty

Part Two – Ignatian Ideals and Methodology

Chapter 9: On Examining One's Conscience

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A cursory reading of what St. Ignatius says about examination of conscience reveals a number of simple facts. He recommends two kinds of examen, a general and particular. Where the general examen covers all our defects, the particular concentrates on one fault or sin for a definite length of time. Among the areas to be examined generally, special attention should be paid to our speech, notably idle words and failings against charity. The particular examination is made twice a day and recalled briefly on rising in the morning; by keeping a written account of the number of faults per half day, we can see our improvement (or otherwise) from day to day and take proper measures accordingly.

Behind this plain façade of methodology lies a wealth of ascetical principles and psychological insight that goes back to the early centuries of the Church. By the daily search into our every action, wrote Chrysostom, we shall make easy and rapid progress towards the highest perfection.

Modern psychology emphasizes the need of specifying the will act for maximum volitional activity. As a general rule, the more definite and circumscribed a prospective course of action, the more effectively will it be put into execution. The lag and discrepancy between resolution and achievement are common experience. How to make the real more closely approach the ideal? Superficially it would seem the more earnest our resolutions the better results we can expect. Yet, without minimizing the importance of energetic beginnings, the main factor is sustained motivation, whether I resolve on a series of actions like the practice of charitable speech, or a single act like the acceptance of a grave humiliation. In either case what I need at the time the performance is due are clear motives in the shape of strong convictions that this should be done and this is the way to do it. Here the examination of conscience becomes indispensable. If I have resolutely decided on avoiding sharp criticism whenever I am crossed, this judgment becomes a thought pattern in my life, which I reenforce every time I make an internal review. Comes an occasion that provokes my patience and immediately I recall the decision to control myself and keep my tongue—supported by all the motives that I have placed behind the resolution.

However, the previous examination of future acts does more than guarantee motivation for the will. It also supplies systematization for the mind. If I have carefully thought through a specific action I want to perform, when the time comes for effecting it, I know what I am supposed to do. Being charitable to a difficult person may involve more than biting my tongue. It may require diplomacy to avoid needless exposure to irritating situations; it may call for speaking kindly to the very man who would normally provoke me; it will always require some adaptation to circumstances which I can wisely anticipate and master because of my anticipation.

This can be highly effective in overcoming unwelcome thoughts. By regularly recalling the kind of thoughts I wish to control and planning on a positive method of controlling them, I give myself the best assurance of success. The reason is that thoughts are more elusive than overt actions; the power of the will over them is described by Aristotle as diplomatic instead of despotic. I cannot say to my mind, "Don't think of this," as I would to my hand, "Don't touch that," and hope for immediate response. I need to substitute another thought-complex for the

undesirable one and hope that the latter will be driven into the subconscious. Through the examination of conscience I foresee what actions can be substituted for the usual ones, with consequently different thoughts evoked in the mind. I may have found that certain reading – perhaps innocuous in itself –brings on a train of thought that will cause me trouble with carnal images or difficulties about the faith. The foresight gained by examination will recommend changes in my reading habits, with corresponding freedom from disturbance in the mind. I can even use my examination to plan on what kind of thoughts to substitute for the bad ones; how I should maintain myself in peace when the disturbances arise; and how to divert my attention to what is attractive, but harmless, and away from what is attractive but potentially sinful.

Theology aside, even natural psychology teaches the wisdom of prudent foresight and internal scrutiny. Arnold Bennett, who was no theologian, forty years ago wrote a little work on the science of self-direction, in which he recommended periodic examination before the bar of reason. "Happiness," he said, "does not spring from physical or mental pleasure, but from the development of reason and the adjustment of conduct to principles. A life in which conduct does not fairly well accord with principles is a silly life; and that conduct can be made to accord with principles only by means of daily examination, reflection and resolution." [1]

The classic example of a man far removed from the cloister and even from orthodox Christianity who used the examination to good effect is Benjamin Franklin. "I made a little book," he says in his Autobiography,

in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I rul'd each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each day of the week, marking each column with a letter for the day. I cross'd these columns with thirteen red lines, marking the beginning of each line with the first letter of one of the virtues, on which line, and in its proper column, I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day. [2]

Franklin gave a week's attention to each of thirteen virtues successively, beginning with temperance and ending with humility. "Proceeding thus, I could go through a course complete in thirteen weeks, and four courses in a year." It is not clear where he got the idea, perhaps from the student guide books in Jesuit-conducted schools in France. But whatever the source, he attributed most of his success in life to this practice of acquiring "the habitude of all the virtues."

Spiritual Confession

The practice of spiritual communion is well established among the faithful and needs no apology or promotion here. It means an ardent desire of the soul to be united with Christ in the Eucharist and, therefore, a communion in spirit which looks forward to sacramental communion in reality.

Comparable to spiritual communion is the examination of conscience as a spiritual reception of the sacrament of penance.

In the sacrament of confession, the penitent must relate his sins to the priest; in a private examination of conscience the confession is made directly to God. In the sacrament there must be sorrow for the sins confessed, at least attrition through fear of divine justice, otherwise the absolution takes no effect; in the examen the same is true, except that mortal sins are not forgiven without perfect contrition motivated by the love of God. For both the sacrament and examination one test of a sincere contrition is the firm purpose of amendment. The absolution in the sacrament is given by a priest in the name of the triune God; in private examens the Holy Trinity effects the remission by direct operation

on the human soul. Finally, to complete the analogy, satisfaction for sins confessed sacramentally is essentially covered by the penance imposed by the priest; in the examination, the penance is self-imposed, yet not without the guiding impulse of the Holy Spirit.

But the relation between the sacrament of confession and daily examination goes beyond even this close comparison. The two are mutually dependent. Theologians commonly teach that the sacraments give unequal graces to different persons, depending on their varying dispositions of soul. What the Council of Trent says concerning baptism, that it confers grace "according to each person's own disposition and cooperation," applies to the other sacraments, including confession. Therefore, the better we are prepared spiritually when approaching the tribunal of penance, the more and greater graces we may expect from the sacrament thus received. In other words, the more humility and charity we have, the greater our detachment from creatures and attachment to the will of God, the more of sacramental blessings we shall be given. The genius of the daily examen consists in its ability to produce these valuable dispositions antecedent to sacramental confession. What better means to induce humility or charity than a courageous look at our sins and gratitude to God for His mercies? What surer way of becoming freed from unruly affections and firmly rooted in God than reflection on how creatures have betrayed us and how the Creator only cannot be loved too much?

If examination of conscience disposes the soul for greater graces in the sacrament of penance, it also implements these graces and carries them into consequent effect. Certainly the purpose of confession is not only the remission of sins, but also the improvement of morals and growth in the spiritual life – for which the daily examination becomes a valuable aid.

Experience and faith tell us we need God's grace and a determined will to overcome the sins and defects we regularly confess. The degree of our determination can be safely gauged by the willingness to submit our habitual failings to an objective daily scrutiny, comparing one day's progress or failure with the next and taking practical measures to avoid the occasions of our moral defects. The more firm our purpose of amendment, the more seriously we should undertake this methodical self-examination. On the side of divine grace, we know that the ordinary means of obtaining God's help is confident and assiduous prayer; and not just prayer *in globo*, but specific petitions requesting specific needs. Daily examination furnishes the framework for this kind of prayer. I have been failing in patience whenever confronted with a situation. As I examine my failure yesterday, I anticipate a recurrence and pray for light and strength to cope with the same problems tomorrow. When tomorrow comes and the provocation arises, I am forearmed with grace merited by yesterday's prayer and the result is a moral victory instead of another defeat.

Two Kinds of Examen

The two examens, general and particular, differ more widely than seems implied in their respective names. In the text of the Exercises, the particular examen comes first, not only in sequence but in objective importance. St. Ignatius called it the "particular and *daily* examen," to be distinguished from the general examen whose purpose is to purify the soul and better prepare it for sacramental confession. This does not mean that the particular examen only is made every day, but that part of its essential character is to go over a specified moral deficiency with daily, uninterrupted regularity.

While St. Ignatius did not invent the particular examen, he reduced it to methodical form and made it so intrinsic to the Spiritual Exercises that as the retreat movement spread throughout the world, the particular examen became the stock-in-trade of modern asceticism. Already in ancient

times the pagan philosopher, Pythagoras, obliged his disciples to examine themselves twice daily, morning and evening, on three questions: What have I done? How have I done it? What have I failed to do? And among the Christian Fathers, St. Basil promised the early monks that, "You will certainly grow in virtue if you make a daily account of your actions and compare them with the previous day." [3]

The wisdom of the particular examen lies deeper than the old maxim, "*Divide et impera*." Evidently we have a better chance to master our tendencies if we take them one at a time and concentrate our efforts on pride, lust, or laziness, instead of scattering volitional energy over the whole field of our passions. But among the aberrations some are more prominent than others, and among these one generally predominates. If I can isolate these dominant tendencies, manifested in a certain pattern of my sins, and work on them, my labor will not only be more effective because less dissipated, but will be directed at the source of my evil inclinations. I shall be laying the axe to the root of the tree. St. Francis de Sales as a young man was given to melancholy which sometimes bordered on despair. He specialized in overcoming despondency to the point where he became the modern apostle of a joyous confidence in God. Matt Talbot had to fight an irrational thirst for drink, which he conquered through concentrated prayer and reached high sanctity in the process. From the standpoint of providence, God permits us to have master passions or weaknesses because He intends them as instruments of our sanctification. They serve to deflate our self-sufficiency and constrain us, as nothing else, to betake ourselves to God in humble and constant prayer which is the touchstone of sanctity.

The general examen has a wider scope than the particular. Its object is to keep the soul alert on all that pertains to the service of God. Here also St. Ignatius was no innovator. But his succinct method for making the general examen has become standard in ascetical literature.

Before examining my sins, I first thank God for the favors bestowed on me in the past and ask Him for light to know my failings and strength to overcome them. The examination itself should be systematic, following in sequence the hours of the day and passing over my thoughts, words and actions in that order. Then I ask God to have mercy on me and promise, with His help, to avoid these offenses in the future.

One aspect of the general examen that maybe overlooked is its function of cleansing the soul of moral guilt. Its high-point is clearly the sorrow we excite over our sins, while begging forgiveness for having offended God. Hence the need of recognizing on doctrinal grounds that both guilt and punishment may be remitted outside the sacrament of penance, including mortal sins, if these are repented with perfect sorrow which includes the intention of later confessing to a priest. Some theologians believe that imperfect contrition will remit venial sins without sacramental absolution; they are certainly forgiven if the sorrow is perfect. When the Council of Trent defined contrition as "a deep sorrow and detestation for sin committed, with the resolution of sinning no more," it was stating a general principle that applies to contrition outside and within the confessional. Through the daily examination of conscience, therefore, a person can literally purify his soul of the stains contracted by sin and thus become daily more fit to receive in greater abundance the blessings that God reserves for the pure of heart.

As commonly understood, the term "examination of conscience" looks only to the correction and forgiveness of sins and moral failings. But St. Ignatius did not make the practice so exclusive. In the First Method of Prayer he provides for self-examination on the seven capital sins not only negatively but also positively – and that in two ways. He recommends that "the contrary virtues be considered," e.g. purity, "in order to

understand better the faults committed that come under the seven capital sins." Moreover, and still more positively, "in order the better to avoid these sins, one should resolve to endeavor by devout exercises to acquire and retain the seven virtues contrary to them" According to the Spanish editors of the Spiritual Exercises, a distinction should be made between the use of the examens during and outside of retreat time. When actually making the retreat, the particular examen is intended primarily to remove whatever faults are committed in the process of going through the Exercises; whereas outside of retreat, this examination should be used not only for extirpating sins and imperfections but also for positively cultivating particular virtues. The general examen, on the other hand, acts as a corrective for sins and evil tendencies at all times, whether during retreat or otherwise. [4]

Value of the Examens

It may come as a surprise that the daily examination of conscience is so highly regarded by the Church as an instrument of sanctification for all classes of people in every station of life.

Priests and clerics in general are urged by Canon Law to make a daily examination of conscience, which Pius XII called "the most efficacious means we have for taking account of our spiritual life during the day, for removing the obstacles which hinder our spiritual life or retard one's progress in virtue, and for determining on the most suitable means to assure to our ministry greater fruitfulness and to implore from the heavenly Father indulgence upon so many of our deeds wretchedly done." [5]

Religious institutes of men and women universally provide an appointed time each day for examination of conscience. Some of the most practical directions left by the founders elaborated on the merits of this practice. St. Vincent de Paul, who was schooled in the Spiritual Exercises, instructed the Daughters of Charity to make a particular examen on their predominant faults not only twice daily at the usual time, but frequently during the day they should ask themselves, "What did I resolve to do?" If it was to mortify impatience, let them reflect, "How have I acted?" And if they have acted patiently under irritation, "Thank God"; if not "then beg for forgiveness and impose a penance on yourself. For it is impossible to correct a bad habit without perfect fidelity in this matter." [6] St. Ignatius valued the examens so highly that in his own lifetime the twice-daily examination was the only mental prayer he prescribed for his young religious. The other half hour of prayer was optionally vocal or mental and more easily dispensed from, but the examens were indispensable.

Less familiar is the practice of daily examination of conscience among the laity as a fruit of the Spiritual Exercises. A recent study of the prayer habits of Catholic lay leaders showed a close relation between their use of the examen and the annual retreat. After a closed retreat of more than three days, the ratio of fidelity to the daily examination was over seventy percent. At the other extreme, the custom was rare among those who had never gone through the Spiritual Exercises. If we recall that from the beginning St. Ignatius gave the Exercises to people whose vocation was to remain in the world, and that self-examination is co-essential with prayer as the foundation of Christian perfection, the only wonder is that more lay persons have not been encouraged to undertake the practice.

When Francis de Sales wrote the *Introduction to a Devout Life* for people in the world, he prescribed an examination of conscience every evening and urged his readers "never to omit this exercise," suggesting the Ignatian sequence which begins with "thanking God for preserving you during the day," and end with "a resolution to make an early confession and diligently to amend if you have sinned in thought, word, or deed." [7]

This recommendation was the outgrowth of the author's own formation in the Exercises of St. Ignatius, from his boyhood as a sodalist in the Jesuit college in Paris to his annual retreat of ten days as priest and bishop of Geneva. The Spiritual Exercises, he used to say, have made as many saints as they contain letters; and intrinsic to the Exercises are the daily examinations.

A word of explanation may be added on the Sulpician method of making the examination of conscience. Popularized by Cardinal de Bérulle, Olier and others, it retains intact the principle of the Ignatian examens, but adds some modifications. Its purpose is not directly (albeit ultimately) to correct moral failings or acquire specific virtues, but rather to cleanse ourselves of those evil dispositions which impede the action of Christ on the soul and resist the inspirations of His grace. Consequently the basic idea of the Sulpician method is to foster union with the Incarnate World by internal acts of adoration and love, and striving to imitate the virtues of the Son of God. On closer analysis this method appears to be an extension of the Ignatian examen and includes other forms of prayer like the meditations and contemplations of the Spiritual Exercises.

Chapter 9 **References**

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[1] Arnold Bennett, *How to Live on Twenty-Four Hours a Day*, New York, 1910, pp. 71-72.

[2] *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, New York, 1927, p. 101.

[3] St. Basil, "Sermo de Renuntiatione Saeculi," PL 3, 647.

[4] *Monumenta Historica*, "Exercitia Spiritualia," pp. 12-13.

[5] Pius XII, Apostolic Exhortation *Menti Nostrae*, N.C.W.C Translation, 1951, pp. 19-20.

[6] *Conferences of St. Vincent de Paul*, Vol. IV, Westminster, Maryland, 1952, p. 214.

[7] St. Francis de Sales, *Introduction to a Devout Life*, New York, 1923, p. 73.