

EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE I

Homily given by Fr. Dennis Koliński, SJC

St. Peter's Church in Volo

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One of the greatest problems in our society today is a loss of the sense of sin, even among a significant number of Catholics. One of the side effects of this state is a lack of a clear understanding about what constitutes a sin. For instance, it isn't at all uncommon for people to come into the confessional and say something to the effect of: "What really bothers me is ..." or "What I really feel bad about is ..." Sin is supposed to provoke a feeling of guilt but feelings in themselves are not the determining factor. In fact, there are plenty of people, who are committing very serious sins, who have rationalized their actions or denied their feeling of guilt for so long that they no longer "feel" that they are doing something wrong. It's kind of like the old song "I know that it's wrong but it feels so right." What one needs to do, therefore, is determine, not "how you feel," but what you have actually done that is objectively sinful.

Priests will tell you that many Catholics today do not make good confessions. The state of affairs here at St. Peter's is better than in some of the other parishes in which I've heard confessions, but nonetheless, we have people here, too, who fall into that category. There are a number of reasons why people don't make a good confession. One is that it's been too long since their last confession. And let's be frank, you can't make a good confession because there is no way that a person can remember his or her sins from the last six, eight or ten months. But perhaps the biggest reason is that they don't make a good examination of conscience.

That's why this Lent I'm going to give a series of homilies on a how to prepare for a good confession, on how to make a good examination of conscience, which should benefit even those, who already make good confessions. Lent is like a six-week retreat, so just like every retreat, it isn't complete without a good confession.

Last Sunday at the beginning of Lent, the Church gave us the account of how Satan tempted Christ to show us that even He was not free from temptation during His life on this earth and to give us an example of how we are to deal with it. This is where some people sometimes get confused when they prepare for confession. They sometimes think that the temptation is itself a sin. But it isn't. All sin starts with temptation but Christ, as we know, did not sin. Temptation is merely that: "temptation." It is a knock at the door of our soul, inviting us to sin. But we have a choice. We can either leave the door closed, ignore it and the temptation will go away or we can open the door and invite it into our soul. It doesn't become a sin until we consciously and by the choice of our free will decide to open that door and actually do something. Christ was able to easily dismiss temptation because He didn't have a fallen human nature prone to concupiscence as we have. However, because our inclinations and passions are disordered due to the effects of Original Sin, we often waver, attracted by temptation, and sometimes have a hard time fighting it.

First of all, to commit a sin, the act, either in thought, word or deed, has to be sinful in itself. We have to commit it consciously and with consent of our free will. Some sins, because they are by their very nature gravely and objectively serious, constitute mortal sins when committed in full knowledge and with full consent of the will. But sometimes we do something that is not fully conscious or act in a manner that is not always freely chosen and

in such cases these sins are of lesser gravity. For instance, we cannot sin in our dreams because we don't exercise our free will during sleep.

Some Catholics don't make a good confession because they're a bit lazy and don't examine their consciences very well. This is often evident with those, who haven't been to confession for a long time. Some just don't make an effort to truly examine their consciences. A few don't even try. But many have probably just never been taught how to make a good examination of conscience.

The first thing to do when examining your conscience is to make a survey of the Ten Commandments. It need not be terribly long or detailed because in certain individuals this can lead to scrupulosity, which when deeply engrained can be very difficult to combat. And when one goes to confession regularly and is in the habit of doing a good examination of conscience, it is relatively easy to quickly call to mind the sins the one has committed since the last confession. We will begin with sins against the commandments that govern our relationship with God.

The First Commandment—You shall not have false gods before Me.

Other things have been more important to me than God and the salvation of my soul: such as, the modern trinity of power, sex and money, comfort, pleasures, sports or television. I haven't prayed—at all. I willingly doubted truths of the faith. I was embarrassed by my faith. I didn't try to deepen my knowledge of the faith. I didn't trust in God. I gave in to despair and doubt. I believed in superstitions, divination, magic, horoscopes and other such things. I played with Tarot cards, Ouija boards or other occult practices. (And yes. Ouija boards are not innocent entertainment. They are doorways to Satan.) I hindered or prevented someone in the practice of religious observances. I endangered my faith by exposing myself

to inappropriate plays, films, books, television programs, the people I hang around with and other such things. I have given scandal by the way I acted or spoke. I wear or have worn non-Christian religious symbols.

The above sins can be either venial or mortal, depending upon the seriousness of the matter involved, the intention or circumstances. There are others that are more serious because they give bad example or scandal and have the potential to lead others to sin; such as if you complained about God when things didn't go your way or committed sacrilege by insulting or making fun of clergy or religious, sacred places and sacred things—churches, cemeteries, crosses, holy pictures.

But some sins are by their very nature mortal because the matter of the sin is objectively serious. I have resisted or have fought with God. I have drawn others away from God by what I have said or done. I have denied the faith, that is, apostatized. I have denied even one of the Church's teachings—that's what we call heresy. I have publicly criticized truths of the faith. I belong or have belonged to atheistic organizations. I belong or have belonged to organizations, which were opposed to the Faith, such as the Masons. I have acted in a manner that contradicted God's laws or the teachings of the Church. One of the most serious, yet frequently committed sins in this category is the reception of a sacrament, such as the Most Holy Eucharist, sacrilegiously, that is, in a state of mortal sin.

The Second Commandment—You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain.

I have uttered the name of God or the Saints in an irreverent manner, without need, jokingly, in hatred or just out of habit. I spoke disrespectfully about religious matters. I wear or have worn religious symbols, devotional items like a Rosary or cross, as decorative items

or good luck charms, instead of as external marks of faith. I have used passages from the Bible as jokes, as a means of justifying something sinful or in support of false teachings. I participated in séances.

Among those sins under the Second Commandment that can provoke scandal are the following: cursing someone publicly, or being embarrassed to say or do something in public that would have outwardly identified you as a Christian, things like saying Grace before meals, making the Sign of the Cross or genuflecting.

Those sins, which are objectively serious under this commandment, that is mortal by nature, are blaspheming God or the Saints; breaking an oath or a vow that one has made to God; swearing an oath unnecessarily or making a false or immoral vow.

The Third Commandment—Remember to keep the Lord's Day holy.

Arriving late at Mass on a Sunday or Holy Day of Obligation, not actively participating at Mass or disturbing someone else, who was trying to concentrate during Mass, are generally less serious sins. But doing unnecessary manual labor on a Sunday or Holy Day of Obligation or profaning the Lord's Day by getting drunk or taking part in sinful entertainment or amusements can potentially cause great scandal. And, of course, everyone here is supposed to know that missing Mass on a Sunday or Holy Day of Obligation through one's own fault, can not only cause scandal by one's bad example, but is also a gravely serious sin. That means, that if you willfully miss Mass on a Sunday or Holy Day of Obligation without just cause (such as illness or extremely hazardous weather conditions) you have committed a mortal sin. And then, if you receive Communion without having received sacramental absolution, you have committed another mortal sin—a sacrilegious Communion.

End of Part I. Yet to come in subsequent weeks are Parts II and III. Because this is such an important issue for all Catholics, I would like to reach as many of our parishioners as possible. Therefore, I will be giving each of these three homilies two times in a row, once at our Mass in the Extraordinary Form, as I did last Sunday, then the following week at all of the Masses in the Ordinary Form, as I'm doing today.