

EXAMINATION OF CONSCIENCE III

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St. Peter's Church in Volo

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After the commandments the most important area to consider in examining one's conscience is the Seven Capital Sins. They're called "capital" because they constitute the principle vices. They engender other sins and are the primary roots that underlie why we commit sins—the fundamental reasons that move our desire to sin. They are also called the "Deadly Sins" because they can easily lead one into mortal sin. Some of them are more serious than others. In ascending degree of seriousness the Seven Capital Sins are: lust, gluttony, avarice, sloth, anger, envy and pride.

The sins of lust and gluttony are carnal sins, sins of the flesh. They can sometimes be motivated by malice but they are usually sins of weakness because they are often committed to some degree under the influence of the passions, which are already disordered within us because of Original Sin. As a result, they are often of less fault but usually more shame is connected with them.

God placed sexual desire within men and women to fulfill the command that He gave to Adam and Eve: "Be fruitful and multiply." In itself, this drive isn't wrong or evil but lust perverts it, leading to excessive and disordered desires that aren't in conformity with how God expects us to live out our sexuality. In a certain sense, lust is an excessive love of the creature, which relegates the love of God to second place.

Gluttony is the excessive disordered desire for the consumption of food and drink—to eat more than one needs, sometimes even to the point of waste, or drink to the point of drunkenness. Drinking with the express intent of getting drunk is a mortal sin. But gluttony doesn't only refer to the amount one eats. It also includes how one eats. Picky eating in which one is overly fussy about what one eats or drinks is also the sin of gluttony.

The sins of avarice, sloth, anger, envy and pride are called spiritual sins because they originate purely in the powers of the soul. They are, generally speaking, of greater fault and that's why pride is one of the greatest sins. As sins of malice, they are more serious than sins of passion because they involve a movement of the will and the greater the movement of the will, the greater the sin. When one commits a sin through passion, one wills something good but is deterred from it by a movement of the passion, which often dissipates quickly. But with a sin of malice a person remains in the sin longer and consequently finds it more difficult to repent. In sins of malice, the person has knowledge of what is good and evil, yet chooses the evil.

Avarice, sometimes called greed, is a disordered desire for wealth and possessions, an insatiable desire to have more. It certainly isn't wrong to desire what we need, but with avarice, we desire beyond our needs and beyond what is reasonable. As a result, one is stingy and lacks generosity toward others, especially the poor and needy. Things of this world become more important than the goods of heaven.

Most people think of sloth as laziness but it is really something else. The sin of sloth, called *acedia*, is a spiritual melancholy, in which spiritual things are considered uninteresting, or even despised, because of too much love for material things. Sloth is a

deliberate refusal to rejoice in the Good and the Beautiful by a person so materialistic that spiritual goods are a threat to him. They weigh down his spirit and cause him sorrow. Sloth is a fear, a dislike or an avoidance of God and what He offers us. One manifestation of sloth is a disregard for religious practices: avoiding them or doing them poorly.

Anger is an emotion, which God has placed within us for a specific purpose. We know that Jesus Himself was angry yet without sin. But anger becomes sinful when it manifests itself in a disordered manner, when it turns into inordinate and unrestrained hatred, when there is a desire to harm someone because of it, when you can't let go of it. Sinful anger often inclines one to revenge and lack of forgiveness. It is usually a symptom of excessive pride.

Envy is not the same as jealousy, which is that you just want to have something that another person has. But with envy, you want to make that person look bad or bring harm to him because he has something that you don't have. So you tear him down because you can't stand his good fortune. Envy can also be a sorrow or sadness that one feels as a result of the goodness or excellence of another person.

Finally, the sin of pride is an inordinate love of self, in which a person esteems himself above others. It is possible to have a well-ordered love of self and sense of self-esteem but only when it is within the context of a sober and truthful perspective of oneself. Pride, on the other hand, is a distorted perception of one's own worth, holding oneself in higher esteem than others in thought, word or deed, and often manifesting itself in a lack submission to lawful authority, even to God, thinking that one knows better. Pride is the most serious of the Capital Sins because it is a sin of pure malice in the will and is at the root of every sin, telling us that we know better, even better than God Himself, just as Adam and Eve desired to determine themselves what was right and wrong, rather than listen to God. Theirs was a sin of disobedience but it was motivated by pride. And more than anything else, the thought that should make us flee from pride is that this whole messed up world we live in, filled with sin, suffering and death, was all started by a sin of pride. Because of that sin, Lucifer, which means "light bearer," is now the Prince of Darkness. And, therefore, when we sin out of pride, we are more like sons of Satan than sons of God.

But there are yet other sins of which we are capable of committing. The sins against the Holy Spirit are those in which one will not turn to God and ask for His divine mercy, sins in which a person refuses to make use of the graces available to him for his salvation. This may be: A refusal to ask forgiveness for sin or putting off confession until one is on his deathbed; a presumption of God's mercy, that is, committing a mortal sin with full consent thinking that one can just go to confession later; the despair, in which the sinner, conscious of many serious sins, thinks that he doesn't deserve God's forgiveness and renounces the grace of His mercy; the rejection of inspirations of the Holy Spirit to do good works, such as, go to confession; jealousy of another for graces he has received; or opposition to some truth of the faith. John Paul II pointed out that there are no limits to the mercy of God, but that anyone, who deliberately refuses to accept it by repenting, rejects the forgiveness of his sins and the salvation offered by the Holy Spirit.¹ As St. Thomas Aquinas tells us, sins against the Holy Spirit are "unforgivable by [their] very nature, insofar as [they exclude] the elements through which the forgiveness of sin takes place."²

The sins, which “cry to heaven” are: murder—“the blood of Abel”³; sodomy—“the sin of the Sodom,”⁴ oppression of people, especially widows, foreigners, and orphans—“the cry of the people oppressed in Egypt;”⁵ dishonesty in the payment of wages to workers.⁶

Then, there are the Precepts of the Church, which some Catholics dismiss as merely human laws. But when Jesus appeared to the apostles in the Upper Room on the evening of the Resurrection, “He breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained.’”⁷ That’s why the Precepts of the Church are binding for us under pain of sin. We must attend Mass on Sunday and all holy days of obligation and refrain from unnecessary work on those days. We must go to Confession at least once a year. We must receive Communion at least once a year during the Easter Season, that is, the period from Ash Wednesday through Trinity Sunday. We must observe the days of fasting and abstinence established by the Church. We must provide for the needs of the Church according to our ability.

What are the other ways we can sin? There are so many because we are so creative in finding ways to follow our will rather than God’s will. We can participate in another’s sin. We can order another to sin. We can advise or entice another to sin. We can praise another’s sin. We can approve another’s sin. We can hide another’s sin or do nothing to prevent it.

For those, who sincerely want to make a good confession, these three Lenten homilies can provide a fairly comprehensive guide for an examination of conscience. Perhaps, they have brought some things to mind, which you haven’t thought much about before. It’s rare that a person should have to go through all of the Commandments and other sins all the time because we usually have a tendency to sin more in certain areas than in others. We have, what we could call, our “favorite sins.” It helps if you make a brief review of the day every evening. Then, your proximate preparation for Confession should only take a few minutes.

An examination of conscience should never take as long as these three homilies, scouring your mind with a fine-toothed comb trying to ferret out every single last tiny sin. The more complete your confession is, the better it is, but a few minutes of preparation should be all that you need because you don’t want to begin calling everything into question—Maybe I did this? Or maybe I did that? Then, you run the risk of falling into scrupulosity. This can be very harmful for your spiritual life because then you enter a realm in which you often won’t be able to distinguish between what really is a sin and what isn’t.

In addition to a good examination of conscience, four other elements are essential for a good and spiritually beneficial confession: sorrow for having committed your sins, a firm intent to amend your life, a sincere confession of all sins since one’s last confession and then execution of the penance given you by the priest. Remember that it is obligatory to confess all mortal sins by type and number to the best of your ability—that is, sins that are objectively grave, committed with full knowledge and with full consent of the will. There is no need to go into graphic detail but if these sins are glossed over or cloaked in ambiguity, your confession will not be a good one. Remember that you are confessing them to God, who already knows what you did and will therefore know whether you are

coming clean with Him or not. Then, although it is not essential to confess all venial sins, it is, nonetheless, a very commendable practice, which will bring you more grace.

The Catechism tells us that “sin creates a proclivity to sin; it engenders vice by repetition of the same acts. This results in perverse inclinations, which cloud conscience and corrupt the concrete judgment of good and evil. Thus sin tends to reproduce itself and reinforce itself, but it cannot destroy the moral sense at its root.”⁸ Regular and frequent use of the great Sacrament of Confession is the remedy, which Christ gave us to heal our souls wounded by this cancer of sin. Just as a surgeon cuts out a small tumor from the body before it spreads and infects other organs, Confession cuts out the cancer of sin before it spreads and mortally infects our soul. The only way that you will become a saint is through regular and frequent Confession. Don’t neglect this great gift given to us and think of it as a regular check-up for the soul, to keep it healthy and grow in sanctity.

¹ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1864 Taken from: John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 46.

² John Paul II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 46. (St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theo. IIa-IIae*, q. 14, a. 3: cf. St. Augustine, *Epist.* 185, 11, 48-49: PL 33, 814f.; St. Bonaventure *Comment. in Evang. S. Lucae*, Ch. XIV, 15-16: *Ad Claras Aquas VII*, 314f.)

³ Genesis 4:10.

⁴ Genesis 18:20, 19:13.

⁵ Exodus 3:7-10 and Exodus 20:20-22.

⁶ Deuteronomy 24:14-15, James 5:4.

⁷ John 20:22-23.

⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1865.