

How to Make an Examination of Conscience

A Redemptorist Pastoral Publication



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How to Make an Examination of Conscience

Catholics are privileged to meet the Lord in the Eucharist and in other sacramental moments. This booklet will help you prepare to receive the sacrament of reconciliation (also known as confession) by helping you make a good examination of conscience. God's power and love are evident in this sacrament of forgiveness.

What Is an Examination of Conscience?

An examination of conscience is a review of our life since our last confession, a tool to help us redirect our steps toward Jesus and away from anything or anyone who leads us away from God or God's kingdom.

As we review our life and acknowledge we have sinned, we hold up the Gospel as a mirror and try to see ourselves honestly, trying to identify what we have done wrong and looking for the root causes and motivations behind these poor choices. We open ourselves to the love of God, who is always ready to forgive us. We ready our spirit so God can accomplish his work in us. In sum, a good examination of conscience helps us reorient our life toward God, who *is* love, and to correct the actions, habits, attitudes, and motivations that are contrary to the teachings of the Gospel.

We believe God's power is most evident when he pardons us. God pardons us because he loves us and wants what is best for us. He takes the initiative to offer us forgiveness—but we must be ready to receive it in the sacrament of reconciliation.

Elements of a Good Examination of Conscience

A good examination of conscience helps us identify and address or correct harmful actions, vices, attitudes, and motivations. It is very important to define these words and behaviors before we make an examination:

- a) For our purposes, an *action* is an isolated deed or occasion of sin. It may be a serious or light offense, but it is not continually repeated—for example, becoming angry with someone who arrives late, hurting someone once, or gossiping or cursing once. All of these actions are wrong and should be avoided, but one-time events should be recognized and treated as such.
- b) A *vice* is an action that is repeated. It is a bad habit that is consciously or unconsciously part of a person's regular behavior. To be in a bad mood all the time, to constantly attack one or more persons, to continually lie: these are actions that

have turned into vices, and they require serious attention. Sometimes a vice is rooted in an illness that requires professional medical treatment, such as dependence on or addiction to alcohol, drugs, gambling, and so forth.

- c) Our *attitudes* and *motivations*, though often subconscious, exert a profound influence on our conscious decisions. Hatred, pride, racism, and materialism are just a few of the attitudes that negatively influence our choices and decisions. We must work hard to become aware of our own underlying attitudes and motivations so we can make choices and decisions that are conscious and free.

In the past, the Church instructed Catholics to mention the number of times they committed an offense. We are no longer asked to tally a particular sin unless it is very serious. Instead, we are urged to identify and confess the habits, attitudes, and motivations that influence our choices and result in sin so we can successfully improve our behavior.

Grace and Freedom

An examination of conscience is a personal exercise in which we look within our hearts to recognize how we distance ourselves from God. At the same time, we must be open to God's grace. As God enters our hearts through the Holy Spirit, we become more willing and able to live the Gospel in daily life. Our efforts would be fruitless without God's help, but God does not interfere with our free will. He acts only when we invite him into our lives and cooperate with his grace. Therefore, we need the Holy Spirit's help to make a good examination of conscience.

It is a paradox that we are most free when we acknowledge our dependence on God's grace: true freedom exists when we become the person God has created us to be, but our growth is dependent on God's help. One motivation for trying to live a good Christian life is to become an authentic, fully developed person. God helps us accomplish this goal when we use our intellect and will to follow Gospel values.

Our Actions Impact Society

Often we like to think our personal behavior has nothing to do with society's problems. The truth is we have an impact on society, and society has an impact on us. For instance, our style of dress is often influenced by the claims of the fashion industry; when we buy the latest styles, we drive consumer demand; increased consumer demand feeds the fashion industry.

Our individual actions also reinforce social behavior. For example, a chauvinistic father is likely to raise sons who will become chauvinists. A person who litters gives a bad example that others may follow. In short, every personal behavior has some effect on society.

It is important that our examination of conscience helps us do what we need to do so we can become who we really want to be. We must reinforce positive values in our society by clearly opposing what is contrary to our personal values. We cannot justify ourselves with

the excuse that “everybody does it.” We must recognize that our personal actions always have repercussions and influence others.

On one occasion a worker commented, “My salary is low and my boss exploits me. So, when I have the chance, I take some things from the office. It’s not really stealing and, besides, my children will never know.” This man is fooling himself. The unfair treatment by his boss is not justified, but neither is his stealing justified. Furthermore, he probably will not succeed in hiding his actions from his children, because everything we do is woven into the fabric of our life. Our decisions and actions color and shape our behavior.

God’s Forgiveness Lasts Forever

When we participate in the sacrament of reconciliation, we needn’t confess all the sins of the past; we need only confess the sins we have committed since our last confession. To recon-