

Preparing to Celebrate the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation—the Examination of Conscience

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Whenever a schoolteacher announces that there is going to be an exam, most students experience some degree of anxiety. Almost instinctively, questions begin rushing through their minds: Am I prepared? Will I get the answers right? Will the teacher grading the test be merciful?

There is one examination, however, that is different—an examination where there is no need to be anxious or afraid, an examination where we are the examiners rather than someone else. The examination of conscience, unlike all school exams, does not test us to see whether we are prepared. Rather, the examination of conscience is a way of preparing. It is a way of preparing for something much greater than any school course. It is a way of preparing to meet God and his infinite mercy and love available in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

What is an examination of conscience? Why do we make one?

Unlike a normal school test, an examination of conscience is not something that we study for in advance. Rather, an examination of conscience is a prayerful reflection on our thoughts, words, and actions in the light of the Gospel to determine how we may have sinned against God and others. It is most often used as a way of immediate preparation for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC], 2nd ed. [Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana (LEV)—United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB), 2000], no. 1454). Pope John Paul II taught that an examination of conscience is an indispensable part of preparation for the sacrament, because it allows us to admit that we are sinners and to take personal responsibility for our actions (John Paul II, *Reconciliation and Penance* [*Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*] [Washington, DC: USCCB, 2003], no. 31). The examination of conscience, however, is not done to beat ourselves up for all the things we have done wrong or to shame ourselves for our sins. It is a way to become more aware of our sins and failings so that we can repent, do penance, and be reconciled with God and the Church.

While an examination of conscience is a helpful and necessary tool in order to prepare for the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation, it does not only have to be used immediately prior to confession. It can also be used as a tool to help us advance in the spiritual life. It is a spiritual practice that we can incorporate into our daily routine. For example, prior to going to bed at night, we can make a brief examination of the day. After repenting for any sins, we can ask God for the grace to avoid these sins on the following day. This will help us grow more aware of sin and work on ridding it from our life.

Practically speaking, it will also help us when it comes time to make an examination prior to participating in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation.

How do I make an examination of conscience?

While an examination of conscience can be done anywhere, it is ideal to find a place that is quiet and free from distractions so that we can prayerfully go before God and prepare for the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. This could be in a church, in an adoration chapel, outside in nature, or in a room at home.

1. After finding the right place and quieting ourselves, the first step to making an examination of conscience is recalling God's infinite mercy and forgiveness. This can be done by recalling one of the many stories of God's mercy from the Scriptures: the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Lk 15:1-7), the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk 15:11-32), or the Woman Caught in Adultery (Jn 8:1-11). It is important to recall God's mercy and forgiveness so that, as we examine our faults and our failings, we might not despair and lose hope in God's particular love for us.

2. The second step to making an examination of conscience is praying for enlightenment and asking the Holy Spirit to be present. Praying for enlightenment invites God's Spirit to help guide us in our reflection.

3. The third step to making an examination of conscience is to look at our life since the last time we went to confession or the last time we made an examination. Relying on the help of the Holy Spirit, we recall the ways that we fell short of loving God, loving our neighbor, and loving ourselves. As we often pray at the beginning of mass in the *Confiteor*, we remember the ways in which we have sinned "in my thoughts and in my words, in what I have done and what I have failed to do" (*Confiteor, The Roman Missal, Third Typical Edition* [Washington DC: USCCB, 2011], 747). An examination of conscience looks not only at the things we have done (sins of commission) but also the things we have failed to do (sins of omission).

If we are not used to regularly making an examination of conscience, it might be helpful to use a guide during step three. Typically, guides follow the Ten Commandments, the Beatitudes, or some other moral catechesis found in the Scriptures. The important thing is that all examinations of consciences should be made in light of the Word of God (CCC, no. 1454). An appropriate examination of conscience should also take into account a person's age (child, young adult, adult) and vocation (single, married, religious). A young child's sins are often very different from an adult's sins.

4. Finally, after examining our lives and the ways in which we did not love as we were called to love, we express our sorrow to God and ask him for his help to avoid these sins and the near occasion of sin. We end by making a firm resolution, with the help of God's grace, to avoid these sins. Unlike exams in school, there is no way to fail this examination if we are open and honest with ourselves and with God. "Merciful and gracious is the Lord, / slow to anger, abounding in mercy" (Ps 103:8).

Sample Examination of Conscience Guide for Young Adults and Adults

Using Jesus' great commandment of love of God and love of neighbor, the following questions are meant to serve as a sample guide for reflection.

How do I relate with God?

- "Have I loved someone or something (power, pleasure, possessions, etc.) more than God?
- "Have I spent time in personal prayer each day with the Lord?
- "Have I used God's name lightly, carelessly, or in cursing?
- "Have I been involved in superstitious practices?
- "Have I attended Mass every Sunday and on holy days of obligation?
- "Have I paid attention and participated during Mass?
- "Have I regularly showed up to Mass late or left Mass early?
- "Have I observed Sunday as a day of faith and family?
- "Have I worked unnecessarily on Sundays?

When asked which was the greatest commandment, Jesus answered by saying: "You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. The whole law and the prophets depend on these two commandments" (Mt 22:37-40).

How do I relate with others?

- "Have I honored and respected my parents?
- "Have I treated my siblings with respect?
- "Have I cared for my elderly and infirm relatives?
- "Have I been obedient to those who exercise legitimate authority over me?
- "Have I damaged the reputation of another?
- "Have I gossiped? Have I spread rumors about others?
- "Have I harmed anyone physically or emotionally?
- "Have I encouraged someone to have an abortion?
- "Have I stolen anything that does not belong to me?
- "Have I returned or made restitution for what I have stolen?
- "Have I held a grudge or refused to forgive someone?
- "Have I led other people into sin by my example or influence?
- "Have I been unfaithful to the vows I have made, especially the vows of marriage?
- "Have I engaged in sexual activity outside of marriage?
- "Have I refused to help the poor or the marginalized?
- "Have I failed to practice the corporal or spiritual works of mercy?
- "Have I been racist or discriminated against others?
- "Have I been judgmental of others?
- "Have I been charitable with others?
- "Have I missed opportunities to go the extra mile and help someone in need?

How do I relate to myself?

- "Have I used profane or crude language?
- "Have I abused alcohol to the point of drunkenness?
- "Have I used illegal drugs?
- "Have I excessively gambled?
- "Have I looked at pornography?
- "Have I entertained lustful thoughts or fantasies?
- "Have I misused the gift of sexuality and not respected my body or the body of another?
- "Have I had an abortion?
- "Have I failed to follow the Church's teaching on being open to having children?
- "Have I dressed immodestly?
- "Have I lied?
- "Have I been jealous of other people's goods?
- "Have I been prideful or arrogant?

Where can I find other examinations of conscience?

Additional resources for examinations of conscience are available on the USCCB website. There are examinations for children, young adults, single people, and married people. There is also an examination in light of Catholic social teaching. These can be accessed by using the following web address: www.usccb.org/prayer-and-worship/sacraments/penance/examinations-of-conscience.cfm.

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