

The Necessity of Self-Knowledge and A Method for the Examination of Conscience

*The Spiritual Life:
A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*

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The Necessity of Self-Knowledge

A few words will convince us of this.

448. A) If we lack self-knowledge, it is morally impossible to perfect ourselves. The reason is that we then entertain *illusions* concerning our state, and, according to; our character or our changing moods, we fall either into a *presumptuous optimism* that makes us believe we are already perfect, or into discouragement that/causes us to exaggerate our faults. In either case, the result is almost identical: inaction, lack of sustained effort, carelessness. Besides, how can we correct faults with which we are not acquainted or of which we have at best but an imperfect knowledge? How [to] undertake the cultivation of virtues, of qualities of which we have but a vague and confused notion?

449. B) An honest and accurate knowledge of ourselves on the contrary, is an incentive to perfection. The good qualities we discover move us to thank God and to show our gratitude by generous co-operation with His grace. Our *defects* and the realization of our helplessness show us how much we have; yet to accomplish, and how important it is to lose no opportunity of advancing. Then we profit by all occasions to uproot or, at least, to weaken, mortify, overcome our vices and to foster and further the growth of our good qualities. Conscious of our weakness, we humbly beg of God the grace of advancing each day and, upheld by trust in Him, we cling to the desire and the promise of success. This is what excites and steadies our efforts.

The Object of Self-Knowledge

450. **General Remarks.** That this knowledge be more profitable, it should extend to *all that is ours*, qualities and defects, natural and supernatural endowments, likes and dislikes, our personal history, our faults, our efforts, our progress; all this to be studied, not in a pessimistic frame of mind, but with due impartiality, with a right conscience enlightened by faith.

a) We should then candidly, without any sort of false humility ascertain what are the good *qualities* that Almighty God has dealt out to us, not, indeed, to glory therein, but to thank the Giver and to cultivate His gifts. These are the talents He has entrusted to us and of which He will ask an account. The field to be explored, then, is vast indeed, comprising as it does all our *natural* and *supernatural* gifts — those things which we hold directly from God, and those we have received from our parents; those we owe to our Christian education and those that are the results of our own efforts sustained by grace.

451. b) We must, at the same time, face with courage the sight of our *miseries* and our faults. Drawn forth from nothing, thither forever we tend. We can neither subsist nor act, except by the ever-present concurrence of God. Drawn to evil by a threefold concupiscence (N. 193 and foll.), we have added new strength to our evil tendencies by our actual sins, and by the evil habits resulting from them. We must humbly acknowledge this fact and, without

losing heart, set to work with the help of divine grace to heal these wounds by the practice of Christian virtue and thus approach the perfection of Our Heavenly Father.

452. **Practical Applications.** To guide ourselves in this study we may examine successively our *natural* and *supernatural* endowments, following a sort of *questionnaire* that will facilitate our task.

A) *Our Natural Gifts.* Regarding the **natural gifts**, we may ask ourselves, before God, what are our outstanding tendencies. In this we may adopt the following practical, if not strictly philosophical order.

453. a) **As regards the sensitive appetites.** Is feeling predominant with us, or is it reason and will? There is within all of us this mixture of the higher and the lower, but not in the same proportion. Is our love a matter of sentiment rather than of devotedness and will? Do we control our exterior senses, or are we under their sway? What power do we hold over our imagination and our memory? Are not these faculties excessively flighty and often engaged in empty daydreaming? Are our passions properly directed and controlled? Is sensuality our ruling passion, or is it pride or vanity? Are we *apathetic*, soft, listless, sluggish? If we are slow by nature, do we, at least, persevere in our efforts?

454. b) **As regards the mind.** What sort of mind do we possess? Is it quick and clear but superficial, or slow but deep? Do we belong to the intellectual, reflective type, or do we belong to the class of practical men, who study in order to love and to act? How do we set about the work of cultivating our mind? Do we do so with earnestness or with unconcern; steadily, or by fits and starts? What results do we obtain? What are our methods of study? Could we improve upon them? Are our judgments biased by our feelings? Are we *obstinate* in our opinions? Can we listen with an open mind to those who hold views different from ours?

455. e) **As regards the will.** Is our will weak and inconstant, or is it strong and persevering? What do we do to train it? The will should *reign supreme* over the other faculties, but it cannot do so unless we use great tact and make great efforts. What do we do to assure the control of the will over our exterior, and interior senses, over the activities of our mind? What do we do to strengthen, to steady the will? Have we strong convictions? Do we renew these frequently? Do we strengthen our will power by fidelity in little things, and by the small sacrifices of daily life?

456. d) **As regards character.** *Our character* is of capital importance in what concerns our relations with the neighbor. A *good disposition*, the gift of getting along with others, is a powerful asset to zeal, and a *bad disposition* one of the greatest obstacles. A *man of character* is one who, having the courage of his convictions, strives resolutely and perseveringly to live up to them. A good character is that harmonious combination of kindness and firmness, of meekness and strength, of frankness and tact that elicits the esteem and the love of those with whom it comes in contact. A *bad character* is one which is lacking in frankness, in kindness, in tact or in firmness, or which, by allowing egoism to hold sway, is rude in its manner and makes itself repulsive, at times hateful to others. Here then, we have an important element for study.

457. e) **As regards habits.** Habits result from a repetition of the same acts, and they make the repetition of these acts easy and pleasant. It is important to study such habits as we have already acquired, in order to strengthen them, if they are good, to uproot them, if they are bad. What we shall say in the second part of this, treatise about the capital sins and the virtues, will be of help to us in this inquiry.

458. B) **Our supernatural gifts.** Penetrated as our faculties are by the supernatural, we would not gain a complete knowledge of ourselves if we did not take account of the supernatural gifts God has imparted to us. These we have described above (n. 119 and foil.). God's grace however takes sundry forms in its way of working, and it is important that we study its special action upon our. soul.

a) We must examine the *attraction* a grace makes us feel for such or such a virtue. Our sanctification, in fact, depends on the docility wherewith we follow these motions of grace.

1) There are *decisive moments* in life when God speaks in clearer and more urgent tones. To hearken to His Voice and follow His inspirations is of the utmost importance.

2) We should ask ourselves whether there be among the attractions we feel, one that is predominant, stronger than the others, oft-recurring, drawing us toward a particular kind of life, toward a certain kind of prayer, toward some determined virtue. We shall thus find the *special way* wherein God wishes us to walk. It is important that we enter it, for it is there that we shall receive the fulness of grace. .

459. b) Besides discovering our attractions, we must also take cognizance of the *resistance we offer to grace*, of our *failings*, of our sins, in order to regret them with all sincerity, make amends and avoid them in the future. This is a painful, humiliating study, especially if carried out honestly and minutely, but it is a most profitable one; for, on the one hand, it is a great aid in the practice of humility, and on the other, it throws us with perfect trust on the merciful love of God, Who alone has the power to heal our weaknesses.

The Means of Obtaining Self-Knowledge

460. Self-knowledge is *difficult* to attain, a) Attracted as we are by *outward things*, we hardly care to enter into ourselves to scrutinize that unseen miniature world; we care even less, proud as we are, about discovering our faults.

b) Our *interior* acts are *extremely complex*. There is within us, as St. Paul says, the lower life of the flesh and the higher life of the spirit and often turbulent conflict ensues' between them. In order to sift what proceeds from nature, what from grace, what is wilful, and what is not, a great deal of attention is required, a great deal of insight, of honesty, of courage, of perseverance. The light comes — but gradually a bit of knowledge leads to more, and this prepares the way for deeper insight.

461. Since it is through *examinations of conscience* that we come to know ourselves; we shall give, in order to facilitate this exercise, some general rules, offer a method, and suggest the dispositions with which these examinations should be made.

462. A) **General Rules**, a) In order to perform this examination well, we must first of all invoke the *light of the Holy Ghost*, Who "searcheth the reins and the hearts" of men, and beg Him to show us the inmost recesses of our soul by bestowing upon us the gift of knowledge, one of whose functions is to help us know ourselves and thus to lead us to God.

b) Next, we must bring before us the perfect Exemplar, *Jesus*, whom we must resemble more and more every day, and we must adore and admire not only His exterior acts, but above all, His interior dispositions. By the light which the contrast between ourselves and our Divine Model will give, our faults and imperfections will be the more clearly discerned. Nor shall we be disheartened at the sight, for Jesus is also the Healer of souls. Whose one anxiety is to dress our wounds and heal them. To make our confession to Him, so to speak, and humbly ask His forgiveness is an excellent practice.

463. e) Then comes the moment to enter into our inmost soul. From *outward* actions we pass on to the hidden causes from which they spring, our interior dispositions. Thus, if we have failed in charity, we shall ask ourselves whether it was through thoughtlessness, envy, jealousy, talkativeness, or from a desire to be witty.

Then to estimate the morality of the act, and to determine our responsibility, we must ask ourselves whether it was *actually* willful, or willful in *cause*; performed with *full* consciousness of its malice, or with only a half-advertence ; with full consent of the will, or with a half-consent. At the outset, all this is rather obscure, but it gradually becomes clear.

To be even more impartial in our judgments, it is good to place ourselves in the presence of the Sovereign Judge, and to hear Him say to us, kindly, indeed, but with supreme authority: "*Render an account of thy stewardship.*" Then we shall endeavor to answer as frankly as on the last day we shall wish to have done.

464. At times, it is useful, especially for *beginners*, to make this examination in writing, so as to concentrate attention better and to be able to compare the results obtained each day and each week. Should anyone do so, however, care must be taken to avoid anything that savors of self-seeking, any studied elegance of style, and the danger of having such memoranda fall under the eyes of others. If we use a record with conventional signs, we must be on our guard against routine or shallowness. At all events, a time generally arrives when the better course is to discard such means and candidly examine ourselves under the eye of God immediately after the performance of the principal actions of the day, and make a general review of these in the evening.

465. In this, as in all else, we shall follow the counsel of a wise spiritual director, and ask him to help us to come to a better knowledge of ourselves. Experienced and impartial observer, he generally sees better than we do ourselves the depths of our conscience, and thus is more competent to judge the true character of our acts.

466. B) **Methods for the examination of conscience.** Every one acknowledges that these have been greatly perfected by *St. Ignatius*. In his *Spiritual Exercises*, he carefully differentiates between the *general* and the *particular* examination. The former bears upon all the actions of the day, the latter upon *one special point*, a fault to be corrected, a virtue to be cultivated. Both may, however, be made together. In this case, one will limit the general examination to a summary glance over the day's actions in order to discover the chief faults, passing directly on to the particular examination which is far more important.

467. a) The general examination, which every good Christian should make in order to know and to improve himself, comprises five points, says *St. Ignatius*:

1) "The first point is to *return thanks to God* Our Lord for the benefits received." This is an excellent exercise, at once consoling and sanctifying, for it brings into relief our ingratitude, thus preparing the way for contrition, and at the same time it sustains our confidence in God. 2

2) "The second is to ask grace to know the sins and cast them out. "If we want to know ourselves it is in order to reform ourselves, but we accomplish neither without the helping grace of God.

3) "The third, to demand of the soul an account from the hour of rising to the present examen, taking hour by hour or period by period; and first of thought, then of word, and afterwards of deed, in the same order that has been mentioned for the Particular Examen."

4) "The fourth is to ask pardon of God Our Lord for the faults." In fact, we must not lose sight of this, that *sorrow* is the *principal* element of the examination and that this sorrow is mainly the work of grace.

5) "The fifth is to purpose amendment with His grace." This resolution, to be practical, should bear upon the *means* of reform. He who wills the end, wills also the means.

The recitation of the Our Father is a fitting conclusion for this examination, bringing before our eyes the glory of God which we must seek, and uniting us to Jesus Christ in our supplication for the pardon of our sins and for the grace of avoiding them in the future.

488. b) *The particular examination*, in the judgment of St. Ignatius, is of greater moment than the general one, and of even more importance than meditation itself, because it enables us to run down, one by one, our defects and thus overcome them the more easily. Besides, if we examine ourselves thoroughly on some important virtue, we not only acquire that virtue, but all the others related thereto. Thus, whilst we advance in the practice of obedience, we perform at the same time acts of humility, of mortification, and we exercise ourselves in the spirit of faith. Likewise, to acquire the virtue of humility means that we are perfecting ourselves in the practice of obedience, of the love of God, of charity, since pride is the chief obstacle to the exercise of these virtues. There are, however, rules for the *choice of the subject* of examination, and for the manner of performing it.

469. **The choice of a subject**, i) In general we must attack *our predominant fault* by striving to practice the contrary virtue. This fault is, as a matter of fact, the great stumbling block, the great leader of the opposing forces. If it is conquered, the entire host is routed.

2) Once the subject is determined upon, we must attack first the *outward* manifestations of the particular fault so as to do away with whatever offends or scandalizes the neighbor. Thus, if charity be the subject chosen, we must begin by suppressing words and actions contrary to this virtue.

3) Then, we must without great delay pass to the subject of the *hidden cause of our faults*. This may be, for instance, feelings of envy, a desire to be brilliant in our conversation, etc...

4) It is important not to limit our efforts to this negative side, that is, to the struggle against faults, but we must carefully cultivate the *opposite virtue*. Here, to suppress means to replace.

5) Lastly, in order to make more certain of our progress, we should carefully divide the subject of our examinations in accordance with the different degrees of a virtue, so as not to cover the whole field, but merely those acts that more exactly correspond to our individual needs. Thus, as regards humility, one should practice, first, what may be called *self-effacement* or forgetfulness of self; speaking, but little, giving others the opportunity to speak by means of discreet questions, loving to be unnoticed, to lead a hidden life, etc...

470. **The manner of performing the particular Examen.**

St. Ignatius tells us that this particular examen involves three periods of the day and two examinations of conscience.

The first time is in the morning. As soon as the man rises, he ought to purpose to be carefully on his guard against that particular sin, or defect, of which he wishes to correct and amend himself.

The second, after dinner [mid-day], the man ought to beg of God what he wants, to wit, the grace to remember how often he has fallen into that, particular sin or defect, and to amend himself in [the] future; and thereupon let him make the first examen, taking account of his soul of that particular thing proposed, whereof he wishes to correct and amend himself, ranging through the time hour by hour, or period by period, beginning, from the hour that he rose even to the hour and moment of the present examen; and let him score on the top line of the figure as many dots as are the times that he has fallen into that particular

sin or defect; and afterwards let him purpose anew to amend himself until the next examen that he shall make..

The third time, after supper, the second examen shall be made also from hour to hour, beginning from the first examen until the present second examen; and let him score on the second line of the same figure as many dots as shall answer to the times that he has fallen into that particular sin or defect.

472. This method may, at first sight, appear somewhat complex; in actual practice, it proves less so. Should one be unable to devote to it such a notable space of time as indicated above, one can condense the essential features of these acts within a shorter period, for instance, ten minutes at night. If one foresees that it cannot be performed in the evening, a part of the time given to visiting the Blessed Sacrament may be set apart for it.

473. C) **The Dispositions** that should attend this examination. That the examination of conscience, general or particular, may be effective in uniting us more closely to God, it must be accompanied by sentiments or dispositions that are, so to speak, its soul. We shall note the principal ones: *gratitude, sorrow, purpose of amendment, and prayer.*

a) First in order is a *lively sense of gratitude* toward God, Who all through the day has encompassed us about with His paternal Providence, protected us against temptation, and guarded us from innumerable sins. Without the aid of His grace, we should have fallen into many a fault. We should overflow with gratitude, thanking Him in a practical way: by putting His divine gifts to better use.

474. b) Such a sentiment will beget a *sincere sorrow*, all the more profound, as we have abused so many benefits received, offending so good and so merciful a Father. Out of this sorrow a sincere *humility* is born. Realizing from our own experience our frailty, our helplessness, our unworthiness, we accept with joy the *confusion* we feel at the sight of our repeated failures; we are happy to exalt the boundless, mercies of a Father ever ready to forgive; and we rejoice that our misery serves to proclaim the infinite perfection of our God. These dispositions are not a passing mood; rather they abide with us through the spirit of penance, calling often to mind the thought of our faults: "*My sin is ever before me!*" I

475. e) **The firm determination to atone** for sin and *to reform our lives* will follow: *to atone* by acts of penance, which we take care to impose upon ourselves in order to deaden in us the love of pleasure, the source of our sins; *to reform our lives* by determining the *means* we shall employ, in order to lessen the number of our faults. Such determination must carefully exclude *presumption*, which by having us rely too much on our own will and our own strength, would deprive us of manifold graces and expose us to additional imprudences and further falls. On the other hand, our determination must rest *confidently* upon the omnipotence and the infinite goodness of God, ever willing to come to our aid when we acknowledge our weakness.

476. d) It is to implore this divine help that we conclude the examination with a *prayer*, all the more humble, all the more earnest, now that the sight of our sins has made us more distrustful of self. Realizing that of ourselves we are incapable of avoiding sin and still more incapable of rising up to God by the practice of virtue, we rely on the infinite merits of Jesus Christ, and cry out to God from the depths of our wretchedness, to come unto us, to lift us from the mire of our sins, and to raise us up to Himself. It is through these dispositions rather than by a minute scrutiny of our faults that our souls are gradually transformed under the influence of grace.

Conclusion

477, In this way, then, the knowledge of God and of self cannot but promote the intimate and affectionate union between the soul and God. He is infinite perfection, and we are absolute poverty. Hence, there is between the two a certain contact. He has all that we need, and we need what He has. He stoops down to us to surround us with His love and His favors, whilst we tend toward Him as toward the One Being Who alone can supply for our deficiencies, the One Who alone can make up for our weakness. Our thirst for happiness and for love is quenched only in Him, Who with His love satiates our heart and all its longings, giving us at once both perfection and bliss. Let us repeat these well-known words: *“May I know Thee, Lord, that I may love Thee; may I know myself, that I may despise myself.”*