

# A TIME FOR SELF-EXAMINATION

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**T**HE success of a retreat often rests upon the mental state of the retreatant. Before a man can approach God in prayer, he must be at peace with God. He must feel at ease in the divine presence. He must be free from those feelings of guilt which construct a barrier between God and the soul. The usual means which the retreatant uses to accomplish this end is the Sacrament of Penance. Thus a necessary part of any retreat is a sacramental confession. In the case of one who is making a retreat for the first time in his life, a general confession, covering all the sins of the past, is often suggested; in the case of those who make an annual retreat, the matter of the confession is usually limited to the offences committed since the time of the last retreat.

The confession that the yearly retreatant makes does not have the same primary purpose as the general confession which a man might make of his whole past life. In the latter case, the penitent reviews all the sins of his life with as great detail as possible. He scrutinizes every period of the past, reviewing all the stages and episodes in which he might have offended Almighty God. He tries to be exact and specific in regard to the number and kind of sins he has committed. He examines the nature of his sorrow for all past sins. He tries to determine whether all his past confessions have been valid. The purpose of the general confession is to make sure that all the sins of one's past have been properly confessed and forgiven. Hence the average individual may make a general confession once or twice in his life's span.

In addition to this general confession, the annual retreatant is also admonished to make a confession of all the sins he has committed during the previous year. This confession differs in two ways from the general confession of one's entire past. First, it is limited to sins and faults that have been committed during the previous year; secondly, it is not as minute and scrutinizing as the general confession, since it is assumed that the weekly confessions after the general confession have all been valid. Inasmuch as most yearly retreatants

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have made at least one general confession, covering the entire past, and have confessed weekly or at least monthly thereafter, one might justly ask what is the purpose of the annual confession made during the time of retreat.

#### COUNTERACTING ROUTINE

Preliminary to a sacramental confession is an examination of conscience. In the case of the person who makes a retreat each year, this examination usually involves the calling to mind of the major lapses which have occurred during the past twelve months. The purpose of the examination is not a detailed searching for every least imperfection, but rather the acquiring of a deeper knowledge of self. Weekly confessions often become routine. The penitent tends to confess the same sins and imperfections week after week without much reflection. As a result, when the time comes to examine his conscience before each confession, his thoughts automatically turn to the matter which he has been accustomed to confess. Other sins and imperfections may have gradually slipped into his life without his fully realising their presence or the effect they may have on his spiritual progress. One of the purposes of the annual general confession is to present a time when the retreatant stops and takes stock of his past actions, especially of those actions which are apt to have been overlooked through routine and stand in the way of his drawing closer to almighty God.

Then again, there may be numerous lesser sins and imperfections which have been a part of the retreatant's life for years, and which, though small, still stand in the way of further progress. It is during the examination of conscience at the time of the annual retreat that a person is more apt to see the importance of eliminating these faults and defects, if he is to make further gains in the spiritual life.

#### INTENSIFICATION OF SELF-KNOWLEDGE

The annual retreat confession, however, does not serve merely as a check against 'routinism' or as an opportunity to discover how certain previously unnoticed habitual faults may seriously hinder progress; it goes beyond this. The examination of conscience during the annual retreat should aim at an intensive rather than an extensive knowledge of self. Its purpose is rather to bring to light the underlying causes of sins which may have become prevalent during

the past year, or may have existed unrecognised for a number of years. The purpose is not a detailed searching for every possible fault committed during the past twelve months. The examination should rather point out patterns of sin and imperfection. It should reveal constantly recurring faults that stand in the way of spiritual growth. The retreatant, at the time of his annual examination of conscience, is like the visitor to an art gallery who takes a few steps backwards, so that he can better appreciate the whole masterpiece, after he has scrutinized each detail of the painting. The weekly examination of conscience gives us a knowledge of one small segment of our lives; the annual examination combines all these segments into one. The picture which we see of ourselves as a consequence is apt to be quite different from that which is the result of the weekly examination of conscience. What might have seemed small and inconsequential when viewed as isolated and single instances in the weekly examination, may now take on a completely different aspect. The minor infractions indicate patterns of action which may be a serious handicap to further progress in prayer. For example, in the weekly confession we may have confessed numerous failings in charity and patience, but looked upon each as an isolated instance of sin. Through reflection at the time of the retreat confession, it may become clear that all these sins and imperfections spring from one common source, namely an inordinate desire to appear as a very superior person in the eyes of others. Any word or action of a companion that in any way detracts from the image of self that we strive unconsciously to build up meets with some kind of an infraction against charity, or at least against patience. It is only by standing back and surveying the totality of our actions during the past year that we are able to discover the underlying motives that are the source of many sins. From a distance, the many isolated and seemingly diverse instances of sin may have a certain sameness about them, inasmuch as they are often committed under the same set of circumstances. The realisation of this sameness will help us to understand why we have repeatedly fallen into certain types of sins, even though we may have made a considerable effort to avoid these sins.

#### ‘SPRING-CLEANING’

At the same time, the retreat confession is a means of reassuring ourselves that all our sins have been properly confessed. One of the purposes of the annual confession is a sort of ‘spring-cleaning’. It is a

time when we retrace the ground covered in the weekly confession in order to make sure that these weekly confessions were complete and valid. Thus any serious sins which we may have omitted through lapse of memory can be confessed during the annual retreat confession. Those sins which we confessed only partially, once again due to a faulty memory, can be fully confessed at the time of retreat.

Moreover, the retreat confession offers an opportunity to go back and evaluate the confessions of the past year. Such an evaluation serves two purposes. It can eliminate any doubt about the completeness and validity of these past confessions, and it can indicate to us wrong habits we may have acquired in the actual making of confessions. When one confesses frequently, confession, like any other spiritual exercise, tends to become 'automatic'. This is especially true when the confession contains nothing but imperfections or venial sins which are not fully deliberate, such as inattention during the time of prayer or a momentary impulse to impatience. It is during the time of self-examination prior to the retreat confession that we are more likely to discover faults in our manner of confessing. These faults may include anything from being too casual in our examination of conscience to being too exacting; from being satisfied with little or no sorrow for our sins to being too scrupulous over the amount of sorrow we demand of ourselves. Thus the examination of conscience previous to the retreat confession can serve as a valuable check on our manner of confessing during the past year.

#### ABIDING SORROW

One of the chief characteristics of the Church's holiness, as portrayed in the lives of the saints, is an abiding supernatural sorrow for sin. Included in the notion of this abiding sorrow is the element of perfect contrition. The outcome of the yearly examination of conscience and confession should be an increase in abiding sorrow for sin. Reflection on the sins of the past week, especially if the sins have been quite minor, is apt to produce little sorrow; reflection on the accumulation of all our sins during the past year is much more likely to stimulate true and lasting sorrow.

Here we must consider the relationship between sorrow and the feeling of guilt. The purpose of the retreat confession is not to stir up new feelings of guilt, but rather to promote supernatural sorrow. Guilt feelings are the natural outcome of sin. They are as natural to man as is the reaction of fear when one is confronted with a

threatening danger. When an individual acts, or considers acting, in a manner which violates his conscience, an immediate reaction is the upsurge of those emotions called guilt feelings. These feelings are God-given. Their purpose is either to keep the individual from sinning, or if he has sinned, to bring about repentance, and to enable him to resolve not to repeat the same act again. The purpose of fear is to keep a man from walking into a situation which can bring great harm; the purpose of guilt feelings is to keep a man from walking into spiritual danger which can bring him eternal ruin. These feelings are experienced not only when one is actually faced with sin but also when one recalls past sins. Thus it is not unusual for a retreatant to experience a considerable amount of guilt at the time of the annual confession. These feelings become harmful to him only if they remain unresolved for a long period of time. In this aspect, they differ from sorrow which can be lasting, and yet creative, not destructive. The goal of the annual examination of conscience is not simply to bring back to consciousness all the sin and fault of the past year with their concomitant feelings of guilt, but rather to promote a deep abiding sorrow for these past sins and faults.

Guilt is a self-centred experience. Supernatural sorrow, which includes the notion of perfect contrition, is a God-centred experience. Guilt involves a type of suffering that remains within the individual and, if left unresolved, undermines his sense of personal worth and self-esteem. Supernatural sorrow, on the other hand, begins within the individual but does not remain there. It reaches out to God. The penitent is sorry not because he has violated his own conscience and thus feels worthless and inferior, but rather because he has offended God who is all good and upon whom he depends for his very existence.

Guilt feelings, if they become excessive or in any way neurotic, can keep a person from God, since they turn him even more deeply in upon himself. They create a feeling of worthlessness which causes a man to think that it is impossible for God to care for such a one as he. As a result, the sinner senses a wall between God and himself. Supernatural sorrow, on the other hand, is centred on God and His mercy. Unlike the person who is plagued with unresolved feelings of guilt, the penitent whose sorrow is built upon perfect contrition can accept his own worthlessness. He realises that left to himself he is capable of committing great sins, but with God's grace he is capable of great deeds. He is able to arrive at this

conviction because he does not centre all his attention on his own sinfulness but rather upon the divine mercy he has received. This realisation takes him out of himself and focuses his attention on God. He can then concentrate on God rather than on his own rebelliousness. Needless to say, an abiding sorrow for sin produces a deep peace of soul, whereas unresolved feelings of guilt can only produce inner suffering and conflict.

Usually the retreat confession, with its previous examination of conscience, is made only after time spent in considering the purpose of life and the means of attaining this purpose. There is also a consideration of sin and its meaning in our lives. Thus the stage is well set to appreciate the meaning of personal sins committed during the past twelve months. These previous meditations should be instrumental in stirring up a sorrow built on the notion of perfect contrition. Since sin is a fact, even after God has forgiven it through the medium of the confession, sorrow should be a lasting thing. God forgives but the fact remains: we have offended Him. This fact calls for the abiding sorrow, characteristic of sanctity, which can be the product of the annual retreat confession.

#### WHY CONFESSION?

The question is sometimes asked: 'Why is the actual confessing of sins necessary at the time of retreat? Is not the examination of conscience which covers the past year sufficient?' It would seem that the goal of self-knowledge and the increase of supernatural sorrow is attained once the examination of conscience has been completed. The actual confessing of the sins discovered by the examination adds nothing to the knowledge of self already attained. Moreover, in most instances the previous confessions of the past twelve months have been complete and valid. Hence, there is no moral necessity to repeat these confessions.

Just as guilt is a natural human experience, so too is the need to confess one's faults. As a matter of fact, the need to confess is the normal consequence of guilt. Even before the Sacrament of Penance was divinely instituted, men and women experienced this psychological need. The ancients sinned just as our contemporaries sin. When this occurred, they felt the pangs of guilt, but since they did not have the use of the Sacrament of Penance, they did the next best thing. They confessed to a confidant or a trusted friend. The very act of revealing their wrong-doings usually relieved the sense

of guilt. Some psychiatrists and psychologists have called this phenomenon an 'emotional catharsis'. This means that the act of confessing serves as a means of ridding the individual of unpleasant emotional experiences. The act of confessing has a cleansing effect. When the confession is completed, the one confessing no longer feels qualms of conscience. The Sacrament of Penance, therefore, has both natural and supernatural components. The natural component consists of the psychological experience accompanying any confession, whether sacramental or not; the supernatural consists of restoring or increasing sanctifying grace. During the time of retreat, one is more apt than at most other times to experience feelings of guilt as the result of concentrating on past sins and faults. There follows a need to resolve these feelings through the medium of a confession. It is true that the natural component of confessing, namely the relieving of guilt, could probably be accomplished by an interview with the Retreat Master outside the confessional, but most would find such a procedure considerably more difficult. More important than this, however, is the fact that the sacramental confession is a medium of conferring sanctifying grace, whereas a non-sacramental confession is devoid of such grace. In addition to the resolving of guilt feelings, the retreatant, therefore, gains spiritually from the very act of confessing and receiving absolution from his sins.

A second value of the confession over and above the examination of conscience is that it gives an objective observer, namely the confessor, an opportunity to see the state of retreatant's soul as revealed by an enumeration of all the major sins and faults committed over the course of an entire year. Due to pride, which usually is a part of all of us, we are apt to be blind to certain patterns of sin and underlying causes of sin. To recognize and accept these character defects may call for too great an inner suffering. As a result, we unconsciously divert our attention to the more pleasant aspects of our character. A wise confessor is able to see this mechanism in operation. He is able to point out how we are escaping from the truth, and, in a kindly, helpful way, get us to accept these underlying roots of sin. It is simply a matter of two heads being better than one, especially when the second head is not emotionally involved in the life that has produced a certain number of sins and faults.

A final value comes from the actual enumeration of our shortcomings. Although most of us are not aware of the fact, we gain

considerably more insight into ourselves when we talk about ourselves to others, than when we merely sit down and try to 'think through' our problems and difficulties on our own. It seems as though the very phenomenon of openly talking about ourselves and our actions makes them take on greater meaning and significance. They appear in a clearer light. We are able to see certain implications which we previously missed. We are able to face up to all these implications much more easily. Through the verbal confession of the sins and faults of an entire year, the retreatant is forced to talk about himself and many of his actions. As a result of this confession, he is quite apt to gain new insights into why he falls so frequently into a particular type of sin, or why he has been unable to conquer a specific habit of sinning in spite of a seeming desire to put an end to this habit. Thus the very act of confession can increase self-knowledge and self-understanding beyond the level attained through mere examination of conscience.

#### MENTAL ANGUISH

A final question has to do with an objection one sometimes meets when a general confession is suggested. 'It is bad for me to go back and stir up the past. I become too disturbed and upset'. For some individuals this can be a quite valid objection. The annual confession with its concomitant examination of conscience becomes a time of dreadful suffering. The past is relived, and new doubts about previous sins and their forgiveness are generated. However, those who experience such trials during the time of the annual retreat cannot be said to have healthy consciences. Either they are suffering from some form of pathological guilt, or they have fallen into the vice of trying to excuse obviously sinful actions by means of flimsy rationalisations.

If the retreatant has a neurotic conscience, the wiser course would probably call for the omission of the yearly confession, since the confession can serve no beneficial purpose. Due to anxiety, doubts and scruples, such a retreatant gains little or no increase in self-knowledge and understanding from a general confession. As a matter of fact, he usually becomes even more deeply engrossed in the perplexities of his twisted conscience. He becomes even more self-centred. He rarely arrives at that abiding sorrow that should be the product of the annual confession.

In the case of the retreatant who has fallen into the habit of



falsely excusing his sinful actions either on the grounds that they are not sinful or that they are only venial sins, the remedy is quite different. For him, the suffering of the mental anguish which sometimes accompanies a general confession brings about a reform. It is only through suffering that he will be brought to look upon his soul as it actually is. Doubts and anxieties about the past will cause him to re-evaluate his way of living. Sooner than continue to experience the deep pangs of guilt stirred up by the examination of conscience, he will change his life. Just as it is necessary for one who has broken a leg to experience the anguish of a knitting bone in order that eventually he may have a sound limb, so it is necessary for the retreatant who has fallen into the habit of self-deception to endure the anguish of guilt, in order that he may eventually have true and lasting peace of soul.

With most, however, the annual confession during the time of retreat should hardly be a period of mental anguish. The man of faith, who is convinced that his past sins have been forgiven through the medium of God's mercy in the confessional, is able to reconsider the sins of the last twelve months with calm equanimity. He is filled with heartfelt gratitude for God's goodness and mercy towards him. His trust and love of God is increased.

#### CONCLUSION

The purpose of the retreat confession, therefore, is not forgiveness of past sins, since the sins that are confessed have already been forgiven by weekly confessions. It is rather to promote a deeper sorrow for sin and a greater appreciation of God's mercy. The general confession should also bring about a firmer resolution to rid one's self of predominant patterns or habits of sin. Finally, it should eliminate all the guilt feelings and possible scruples which may be the result of sins committed during the past year, even though these sins had been previously confessed. Thus the retreat confession is designed to produce that peace of soul which is so necessary if the *Spiritual Exercises* are to be effective in our lives.