

EXAMINING THE CONSCIENCE

Father Christopher Beaudet

Galtier Society's Lenten Day of Recollection
The Church of Saint Charles Borromeo, Saint Anthony MN
4 March 2006

RECORD KEEPING

Saint Pius X once remarked “With what diligence do we see [people of the world] attending to their affairs! How frequently they compare their profits and their losses! How exact and careful is their bookkeeping!” The Holy Father applied this observation to how the Christian is called to keep tabs, to check inventory, to maintain a balance sheet on his spiritual welfare. The Galtier Society is geared primarily to professionals, people of responsibility, administrators, executives, and others who maintain households and budgets. How exact and careful is your bookkeeping! When you sit down with your chequebook and reconcile it with a bank statement, when you gather your financial documents for filing your income tax (right about now), when you speak with your spouse about investments for your children's future education, your retirement, or to establish a safety net... all of these things require time and effort. And they must be done well or the consequences could be devastating. You understand that already. Pope Saint Pius X speaks, then, to you. If we are so careful in our record-keeping for earthly treasure, how much more ought we to keep record and close examination in our storing up of heavenly treasure!

Scripture asks us “What profit a man to gain the whole world and to forfeit his soul in the process?” There are two ways, it seems to me, by which we may forfeit our soul in gaining the world. The first way is a flat out capitulation to the Prince of Darkness... a “pact with the devil” as we call it. But I suspect that none of us here today have entered into such a pact. The second and more common way is that we become so preoccupied with gaining the world, and we give our whole selves to it, that we end up neglecting the

soul. Gradually, but steadily, the soul asphyxiates from lack of spiritual air, or starves for lack of spiritual nourishment, or pick your own favorite atrophic analogy. The point is, it's neglected. We cannot afford to ignore the soul. We cannot afford to neglect the conscience. It must be examined frequently... habitually.

Examining the conscience is not a strict science. There is no exact formula by which each of us must do it. But neither is it a strict art by which it takes a certain talent, a knack which some people have and others don't. It is somewhat of a combination of the two. Examining the conscience involves both what is objective (that's the science part) and subjective (that's the artistic part). But more about that in a bit. I just want to begin by stressing the necessity of examining the conscience if one is to be a serious disciple of Christ. "Writers on the spiritual life rightly emphasize that examination of conscience is absolutely necessary for the purification of the soul and for progress in virtue. Without regular examination of conscience we never get to know our faults properly. Rather, they increase; evil inclinations and inordinate passions become stronger and may seriously threaten the life of grace. Especially, it will be impossible for charity to develop fully in us" [Dom Benedict Baur, OSB, *Frequent Confession: It's Place in the Spiritual Life* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter Press, 1999) 67].

The person who fails to examine his conscience opens himself to be easily swayed by the seduction and subtlety of evil. Examining the conscience is a response to Christ's call to remain vigilant for we know not the day nor the hour. But even more, examining the conscience is about our ability to love God with our whole heart, mind, and soul. It is a brutally honest look at who we have become to date, either by the grace of God, or by our rejection of that grace. To examine one's conscience is to make an invitation to the Holy Spirit, by his divine fire, to shed light on the truth of our relationship with God, to burn away what is evil, and to warm the coldness of our hearts into more ardent charity. In other words, to examine the conscience is a perfect activity for Lent: an entire season of the Church's year dedicated to conversion of heart... the fruit of examination of conscience.

Just this past week I concelebrated Mass with Bishop Robert Cunningham, the Bishop of Ogdensburg, who referred to Lent as “the Church’s annual communal retreat.” So, what I would like to do with you this morning, as we begin the season of Lent (as we enter into our ecclesial communal retreat) is to consider three questions: 1) What is the conscience? 2) Why does it need examination? 3) How do we examine it?

WHAT IS THE CONSCIENCE?

The conscience is like a smoke detector / fire alarm:

Every house should have one.

It does not create a fire/smoke but bears witness to its presence.

You have to obey it - for your life's sake.

It needs to work properly (formed) - to give an accurate witness to the truth of fire/smoke.

It is properly calibrated (formed) by its manufacturer (God) or authorized dealer (the Church).

Pope John Paul the Great called the conscience “man’s sanctuary” and it is a helpful term. The word sanctuary comes from the Latin *sanctus* or holy. If we recall the Temple in Jerusalem, we will remember that at its center was the Holy of Holies, the inner sanctum in which only the High Priest could enter through the veil and only once a year. The conscience is just such an inner sanctum in the center of the temple of each human person. Now also recall that the High Priest entered that Holy of Holies in order to acknowledge God as God and to fulfill his command to offer sacrifice. The High Priest had a purpose in entering the sanctuary: to converse with God himself in prayer. Similarly for you and me, when we enter the sanctuary of the conscience, we do so in order to encounter the living God, and to be reminded of his law and our need to obey it. In his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth), Pope John Paul II wrote:

The relationship between man's freedom and God's law is most deeply lived out in the "heart" of the person, in his moral conscience. As the Second Vatican Council [*Gaudium et spes* 16] observed: "In the depths of his conscience man detects a law which he does not impose on

himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience can when necessary speak to his heart more specifically: 'do this, shun that'. For man has in his heart a law written by God. To obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged (cf. *Rom 2:14-16*)” (*Veritatis Splendor* 54).

Recall also that the High Priest, when he entered into the Holy of Holies, did so alone. Everyone else waited outside for his return among them. No one else had access. We might recall Zechariah, the father of St. John the Baptist who, when serving as High Priest, entered the Holy of Holies and was told by the angel of the Lord that he and his wife would conceive a son. Incredulous at the angel’s announcement, he was dumbstruck until John was born and he named his son. But when Zechariah came back out of the Holy of Holies, everyone noticed that he was blanched and unable to speak. They were not surprised that he should have encountered God (they expected that) but only at what that encounter had done to him. The point is, everyone had to wait outside until the High Priest returned from that privileged place. So too when each of us enters into his conscience, we enter the place of God’s abode within each of us, and no one else has access. Again the pope wrote:

According to Saint Paul, conscience in a certain sense confronts man with the law, and thus becomes a "*witness*" for man: a witness of his own faithfulness or unfaithfulness with regard to the law, of his essential moral rectitude or iniquity. Conscience is the *only* witness, since what takes place in the heart of the person is hidden from the eyes of everyone outside. Conscience makes its witness known only to the person himself. And, in turn, only the person himself knows what his own response is to the voice of conscience. (*Veritatis Splendor* 57).

Examining your conscience is not something I can do for you. It is not something your spouse (as much as he or she might like to) can do for you. It is not something anyone else can do for you. You must examine your own conscience and enter into that sanctuary where God, the author of the law written on your heart, dwells within you. And in that sanctuary, God will remind you of his law and will summon you to abide by it for your own joy and peace and integrity.

Saint Bonaventure teaches that "conscience is like God's herald and messenger; it does not command things on its own authority, but commands them as coming from God's authority, like a herald when he proclaims the edict of the king. This is why conscience has binding force."

So the pope writes that the conscience, in addition to being the inner sanctum in which we check ourselves against God's law, is also the place where God checks us against his law. The conscience is "*the witness of God himself*, whose voice and judgment penetrate the depths of man's soul, calling him . . . to obedience." (*Veritatis Splendor* 58). We have a word to describe the sense we have when we know God's judgment finds us wanting... we call it guilt. Now we've all heard the Catholic guilt jokes, as if there were different brands of guilt: Presbyterian guilt, Lutheran guilt, etc... It's bad enough to feel guilty, it's worse to feel Catholic guilty, so the story goes. My purpose today is not to make anyone feel guilty for anything . . . unless, of course, you should be! To feel guilty is a good thing . . . for the guilty. Guilt is like the ringing smoke detector. There's smoke... which means there's fire. It needs to be put out. Address it! Guilt is like physical pain. We will not go to the doctor for an ailment if the ailment does not ail us. The physical pain we feel in our back, our knee, our right ear, our pinpointed area of the body, is what drives us to seek the remedy we need for wholeness. Similarly, the guilt we feel in our conscience over the pinpointed sin we have committed is what drives us to seek the remedy we need for our holiness. Feeling guilt is proper for the guilty. Now, can we become guilt-ridden and allow guilt to become irrationally oppressive and disproportionate? Yes. But society has lumped guilt with aberrations of guilt and, consequently, has sought to eliminate guilt altogether. That is problematic because a healthy conscience will be able to feel guilt.

So, what is the conscience? It is man's sanctuary where each of us assesses himself and is assessed by God in terms of our faithfulness or lack thereof to God's law. The Catechism of the Catholic Church defines it as: "Prayerful self-reflection on our words and deeds in the light of the Gospel to determine how we may have sinned against God."

WHY DOES IT NEED EXAMINATION?

The conscience needs to be examined because it can be wrong. We can never ever forget that our human condition is a wounded condition. There is a rebellious spirit within each of us which seeks to determine unto ourselves what is right and what is wrong independent from any dictate of God. This is what happens when we rationalize our actions. Though intellectually we may know that this is folly, we have to be honest and realize that we are all tempted to call that which is evil “good” and that which is good “evil” so that we can obey our passions rather than God. So, our conscience must be well-formed, otherwise we will be without a moral compass.

This is where so many people are confused today, and understandably so. Take, for example, the sin of contraception. For decades, Catholics were told by their priests that while the Church teaches that use of contraception was immoral, what each couple really needed to do was to “follow your conscience.” We hear that said all the time: “follow your conscience.” And because no one enters the sanctuary of the conscience except each person unto himself, there is a tendency to think that the conscience of each person is utterly different. What moral norm I find in my conscience is mine and what moral code you discover in yours is yours. But what this fails to acknowledge is that the God encountered in each sanctuary of each individual is not a different God for each with a different law but the one God summoning each person to obedience to his law.

But as Pope John Paul II pointed out:

[t]here is a tendency to grant to the individual conscience the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil and then acting accordingly. Such an outlook is quite congenial to an individualist ethic, wherein each individual is faced with his own truth, different from the truth of others. Taken to its extreme consequences, this individualism leads to a denial of the very idea of human nature (*Veritatis Splendor* 32).

So let’s all be clear about this. The conscience enjoys a certain freedom from constraint; I cannot force you to act contrary to your conscience. But the freedom which the conscience enjoys is not license. Rather, the conscience also has a responsibility to judge

rightly. The duty of the conscience is not to determine good from evil but to help determine the goodness or evilness of this particular action in light of what is, objectively, good and evil. Cardinal John Henry Newman put it: "Conscience has rights because it has duties" (*A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk: Certain Difficulties Felt by Anglicans in Catholic Teaching* (Uniform Edition: Longman, Green and Company, London, 1868-1881), vol. 2, p. 250). Do we have a duty to follow our conscience? Absolutely. But do we have the duty to form the conscience rightly? Absolutely. Never forget that second part. And when the Church teaches on faith and morals, incorporate that teaching into your conscience. Never stray from it. That is a basic starting principle for a well-formed conscience.

There is another reason why we examine the conscience, and that is to probe our motivations and to review the grander perspective we have of the moral landscape. Examining the conscience begins with particular sins but moves from there to the disposition we have which led us to commit them in the first place. For example, if I have stolen time from my employer last Tuesday afternoon, is it because I am lazy in general and unwilling to engage in work? Are there patterns to my behavior?

So why do we examine the conscience? We do so in order to discover what we have done or failed to do in light of God's law. We want to spot the ailment with specificity and clarity. We examine the conscience in order to cut through rationalization, to check our sinful tendency to rebel against God, and to submit ourselves once again to his dominion and love. Note that the goal is not to discover what "bothers me." What if your sin doesn't bother you, will you still confess it? The point is to confess what bothers God.

HOW DO WE EXAMINE THE CONSCIENCE?

Very often people will seek a more profound experience of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and wonder what must be done in order to achieve it. I think the answer

to that is to more profoundly examine the conscience. What tools are necessary to examine the conscience? I will give you four:

1. Courage: it takes a certain degree of fortitude to pass through the veil of the sanctuary to be alone with God in order to realize our faults and to stare down the ugliness of our sin. Because the conscience is the inner sanctum, it is there that we perceive ourselves in utter nakedness, stripped of all pretenses and delusions. It is the true self which God sees at every moment. We want to know ourselves as God knows us, for self-knowledge is a starting point for true growth in holiness. Not the “fictive self” that we sometimes hand over to God to sanctify. We want to hand over to God our very real selves so that true spiritual growth may occur.

2. Humility: once we have recognized our sin, we need to be humble and not try to rationalize it away, sugarcoat it with attenuating circumstances or excuses, or worse, flat out reject the law of God in indignation and to call our sin “good.” Another word for humility is truthfulness... we acknowledge our sins as truthfully as possible and move on.

3. Hope: This third of the three theological virtues is so important to a proper examination of conscience because it keeps us focused on the ultimate end of our lives: beatific life with God forever. God wills that we be saved, not damned. And so when he calls us to repentance in the conscience, he does so not to burden us but to liberate us, to bring us into divine life, to give us joy. But the process of being purged from sin is sometimes painful and difficult and in the midst of that process we may despair, especially if we commit the same sin over and over again. Hope is the “stick-to-it” virtue necessary to examining the conscience.

4. Regularity: a key to examining the conscience well is to do it often. And so let me say a few words about this.

Examining the conscience is something which the Church asks us to do in immediate preparation for the Sacrament of Penance. This is the kind of examination of conscience

with which we are most familiar. Today, before coming to confession, you should take some time in church to examine your conscience and the fruit of that examination is what you will confess in simplicity, humility, and clarity. How do we do that?

In any examination of conscience, we begin in prayer since it is before God himself that we are exposed for review. It is his tribunal of love in which we are judged and his judgment is always medicinal and loving. And so we may make a prayer to the Holy Spirit to enlighten our awareness of our spiritual lives. We may ask God for the strength to confess those sins which are particularly ugly or embarrassing either by the nature of the sin or by the frequency of having committed it. And then we begin the examination. We start with a standard of God's law and consider the degree to which we have lived up to that standard. We consider the Ten Commandments, for example, or the Beatitudes, and then review the period of time since our last confession to think of the times when we have sinned. Now, obviously, the longer it has been since our previous confession, the more difficult it will be to pinpoint the ailment and the more vague our confession will be. If that's the case, don't worry... still come to confession and include in your confession a failure on your part to maintain vigilance against sin. To use Saint Pius X's analogy, we might say your bookkeeping has been sloppy and it is now time for an audit! But that's fine. Better to confess that than to allow an inability to be specific to keep you from confession at all. Again, remember humility and hope.

Try to reach clarity about your sins and about those interior attitudes and dispositions which set us up to sin. Consider imprudent habits, which may not be sinful themselves, which regularly lead us into occasions of sin. Follow a guide like the Ten Commandments not simply as a checklist... use the commandments of God as a springboard to consider ancillary moral questions. Bring into your reflection the fruit of spiritual reading or a homily you've heard or a holy thought introduced from any source.

Make a firm purpose of contrition and amendment. Formulate the resolution to confess them to a priest and to receive sacramental absolution. Offer a prayer of thanksgiving to

God for having brought you to this awareness of your sins in light of his love. Then, confess your sins.

But in addition to the period of immediate preparation for confession, the Church also encourages her children to examine their conscience more frequently, indeed, daily. We can speak of a general examination, a particular examination, and an habitual examination.

General examination: a review of the day's happenings: thoughts, feelings, words, and deeds. As this is done on a daily basis, the general examination becomes easier as we become more aware of our faults, habits, and customary failings. This is usually done at the end of the day.

For example, the Church's Liturgy of the Hours involves Night Prayer which is prayed immediately before retiring at the end of the day. In the guidelines for celebrating the Liturgy of the Hours it is suggested that an examination of conscience take place after the opening of Night Prayer. Such an examination would consist of a general review of the day's events and encounters with God and neighbor.

Particular examination: This examination supplements the general examination. The goal is to focus on one particular fault that one wishes to eradicate or a particular virtue that one wishes to acquire. Dom. Baur recommends beginning with exterior faults which are annoying to others and then moving to those interior faults about which no one else may know. Once the fault has reached a point where we no longer suffer from it, or at least rarely fall into it, we can then employ the particular examen for the attainment of a certain virtue. He writes: "As we make progress in the spiritual life our particular examination of conscience will tend more and more to take on this positive form; its practice will mean the confirmation of our will in the pursuit of a certain virtue, together, with prayer to God for constancy and perfection in this virtue" (Baur, 69).

Habitual examination: Regular general and particular examination of conscience will enable us to develop the habit of examining the conscience... living in a condition of great self-awareness and self-possession. There are many who move through life without ever possessing themselves. They are given from one passion to the next. They decide matters on what strikes their fancy in the moment. Bode Miller, the U. S. Skiing Olympian from last week's Olympics in Torino granted an interview with NBC and was obviously agitated during the interview. The NBC interviewer commented on that fact and asked Bode Miller what made him tick; what was his "moral code" (those were the interviewer's words). The response? He said that he did what he felt like doing and that which he didn't feel like doing, he didn't do. That's his moral code? There is a lack of integration in such a person as that. His code is ironic because if he applied that same *modus operandi* to his athletic training, he would never have made it to the Olympics. He denied himself all sorts of things in order to win medals. I don't mean to belittle Olympic medals. They are indeed a great sign of achievement. But God calls all of us to be Olympian in the slalom, luge, and ski-jumping of life! We are destined to wear a crown which will never fade or perish.

Again, we can develop the habit of examining the conscience, of being self-aware, by examining the conscience at Night Prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours. We can also do so at the Penitential Rite of the Mass. When the priest states: "My brothers and sisters, in order to prepare ourselves to celebrate these sacred mysteries, let us call to mind our sins", actually call them to mind in the silence which follows! Then when he says the words of absolution (which absolve all venial sin), "May Almighty God have mercy on us, forgive us our sins, and bring us to everlasting life" the words will strike us powerfully and we will more readily enter into the joy of the Eucharist.

Frequent Confession. As a good rule of thumb, I would suggest going to confession once a month, as a matter of habit. Of course, one should take immediate recourse to the sacrament whenever one has committed a mortal sin.

When these are all practiced, we develop the practice of habitual examination of the conscience. The goal is also to answer the question: “Where is my heart?”; to discover “the prevailing disposition that determines its attitude, the real mainspring that keep all the rest of its movement going” (Baur70). Being in the habit of examining our conscience, of entering the sanctuary, will bring out of vagary the underlying *dominant* feeling or issue that is driving us. It is important to do this habitually because that dominant feeling or issue can change at various points in our lives. It could be “the need for recognition, fear of blame, fear of humiliation, fear of suffering, jealousy, embitterment on account of some injustice suffered, suspicion, disordered desire regarding work or health. Or it may be a certain state of spiritual inertia and discouragement on account of certain difficulties or some failure or some other experience” (Baur 69). This can change throughout our lives and it is important to recognize whatever it is that is steering us... and if it is not Christ, if it is not first His kingdom that we seek, then we need to allow God to dislodge whatever end we have misappropriated in his place.

Pass through the veil, examine your conscience, and confess your sins this Lent. Allow God to touch and heal you in the depth of your being, in the sanctuary of your conscience, this Lent.