

# A Modest Proposal

*Frequent confession is not necessarily a*

Christ said: "Do not think I have come to set aside the law and the prophets; I have not come to set them aside, but to bring them to perfection" (Mt 5, 17). Subsequently, in order to illustrate what he meant by bringing the law and the prophets to perfection, he introduced various passages of his Sermon on the Mount with the following words: "You have heard that it was said to the men of old, 'Thou shalt not . . . , but I tell you . . .'" (Mt 5, 20, 5, 27; 5, 33). Thus the law of the Old Testament, both in the form of the decalogue and as proclaimed by the prophets, was replaced by the "law of Christ" (Gal 6, 2), whose greatest command is to love God wholeheartedly and to love our neighbor as Christ Himself loved us. However, most Catholics examine their conscience only with respect to the Ten Commandments, often forgetting (if they know it at all) the law of Christ. As a result, they frequently overlook their hidden faults and the root of their shortcomings; and by taking on a certain spirit of self-righteousness, they cheat themselves with regard

to the closeness of their relationship to God.

Frequent confession by itself is not necessarily a sign that a person is willing to die to sin with Christ and to live in a newness of life (cf. Rom 6). To be a sign of this, confession (or any other sacrament for that matter) must lead us to a truly personal encounter with Christ. Confronted with him who alone knows the secrets of our hearts, all our rationalizations and self-defenses should collapse and thus free us for the realization of the new creature which we became at baptism and which should reach its perfection when Christ will come again and recompense everyone according to his works (Mt 6, 27).

Therefore, I would like to propose to those of our students who earnestly strive for perfection, a different type of "examination of conscience", not based on the Ten Commandments, but on the actual words of Christ and St. Paul. However, if it were used by others, more detailed questions would have to be inserted, especially as far as sins against faith, life, chastity

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and justice are concerned. It is hope that this "examination of conscience" will lead those who want to be Christians to a deeper union with both Christ and the other members of His Mystical Body.

The examination of conscience is divided into four themes: God, my vocation, my neighbor, my inner life.

## I. God

1. "Believe the Gospel" (Mk 1, 15).

Am I glad and grateful because God exists, is good, and has called me to an intimate union with him?

2. "The Father himself is your friend" (John 16, 27).

Am I anxious to keep contact with God? . . . in prayer, in everyday life? Do I trust in him and commit my whole being to his loving providence? Do I share everything with him, my joy, my needs, my failures? If I have sinned, do I humbly try to attain his forgiveness, or do I lose hope and try to hide myself from him? Do I prefer other persons or even material things to God?

3. "Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and serve none but him" (Mt. 4, 10).

a. Is God my highest Lord in all things of my life? Am I subject to him in everything?

b. Is there anything in my life which could separate me from God? Is there danger of my becoming unfaithful to God, perhaps even gravely? Do I shun near occasions of sin? Am I willing, if need be, to sacrifice everything for him?

c. Am I willing to accept honor and health as well as contempt and sickness, or whatever God in his wisdom and love will send me from his hands?

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**LUDWIG LEHMEIER, S.V.D.**

*Dean of Religion*

sign that a person is willing to die to sin with Christ and to live to a new life . . .

## II. My Vocation

4. "That you may be true sons of your Father in heaven (Mt 5, 45).
  - a. Do I earnestly try to live as a son or daughter of this Father, in conformity with his Spirit, his commands, his love? Do I endeavor to be good to others because God is good to me?
  - b. How often do I take part in the Family Meal (Holy Communion) of the children of God? What hinders me from accepting my Father's invitation more frequently?
5. "Follow me" (Mt. 9, 9). Am I open to Christ's call to be his disciple in whatever state of life he has chosen for me? Am I prepared to imitate his example perfectly in my life in order to be the "light of the world"?
6. "He gave five talents to one, two to another, and one to another according to their several abilities" (Mt. 25, 15).
  - a. Which special talents and gifts has God entrusted to me? (Character, physical and mental abilities, profession, grace).
7. "He who is not with me, is against me; he who does not gather with me, scatters" (Mt. 12, 30).
  - a. Do I do my duty as a member of Christ's mystical Body by professing my faith unashamedly and by trying to spread the "Glad Tidings" among those who do not yet love Christ?
  - b. Are others (Communists, etc.) more active in the promotion of their cause than I in the promotion of Christ's?

## III. My neighbor

8. "Do to other men all that you would have them do to you" (Mt. 7, 12.)
  - a. Do I have an open and compassionate heart for the

needs of other people? Do I try to put myself into their place when I see their needs, when they tell me their wishes and desires? Am I as much interested in their welfare as in my own?

- b. Am I reluctant to give away anything of my superfluous possessions, out of avarice or indifference, although others have need of them? Do I retain things which make my life comfortable but are not absolutely necessary, while others might need them badly?
  - c. Did I offend my relatives or other people through lack of consideration, patience, charity, unselfishness, self-control, interest, etc?
9. "Whatever you refused to one of the least of my brethren here, you refused it to me" (Mt. 25, 45).
    - a. Am I really aware of the fact that God is entrusting other people to me whenever I come into contact with them at the place of my work, in my neighborhood, or when I become conscious of their needs? Or am I dull and blind to that kind of responsibility?
    - b. Was there any person entrusted to my care whom could have helped, protected, guided, encouraged, instructed in the way of God? What did I do in such a case? Am I accustomed to caring for others, or do I keep out of everything which could involve personal sacrifices?
  10. "He who casts his eyes on a woman so as to lust after her has already committed adultery with her in his heart" (Mt. 5, 28).  
Do I see in all persons, especially in those of the opposite sex, temples of the Holy Spirit, and do I respect this dignity of theirs in my thoughts, words and behavior?

## IV. My interior life

11. "Thou shalt not so much as let thy left hand know what thy right hand is doing" (Mt. 6, 3).  
Am I completely unselfish so that I do good, give alms, attend Mass, receive the sacraments, purely for God's sake, or do I indulge in this commercial spirit which always asks: what do I get out of this or what? Am I really truthful both towards others and towards myself? Is a well-informed conscience always the ultimate rule for all my actions?
12. "Blessed are the clean of heart" (Mt. 5, 8).  
Do I respect my own dignity as a temple of God in thoughts, words and desires? Do I have the firm will never to abuse my sexual faculty for the satisfaction of passions and base drives?
13. "Yours is to be the same mind which Christ Jesus showed" (Phil 2, 5).  
Do I earnestly try to shape my inner dispositions after the example of Christ — by overcoming hatred, avoiding all kinds of injustice, forgiving, respecting all people as brothers in Christ, regardless of their race, religion or social status, blessing and praying for those who wish or even do me evil?
14. "You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt. 5, 48).  
Am I striving to overcome the legalistic approach to morality by being open to the law of the Spirit who wants to lead me to perfection, and not by being content with the bare minimum — avoidance of mortal sin?

*\*This "examination of conscience" is based on Klemens Tilmann: Die Führung zu Busse, Beichte und Christlichem Leben (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1961), pp. 67-70.*