METHODS OF
SELF-EXAMINATION

BY
A GROUP OF PRIESTS

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WITH FOREWORD BY
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FOREWORD

Amongst those who feel a serious desire to know the true state of their own sinful hearts there can be very few who have not experienced the grave difficulties which surround the subject of self-examination. It is no easy task to strip the soul bare of those disguises which hide from it its real condition. As a religious exercise, moreover, there is a danger, without due care, of its degenerating into a kind of mechanical formality which robs it of its value. There are many, however, who are truly anxious to let in the light upon themselves, to expose the roots of evil with a view to their eradication to cultivate a temper responsive to divine calls, and to penetrate those inner springs of thought, motive, feeling and resolve—but without quite knowing how this can be effected.

None of us can afford to dispense altogether with those questions on the Decalogue and the Deadly Sins which form the only scheme of self-examination in most manuals of private devotion; but there is the danger lest the exclusive use of such a system should tempt one to over-emphasize the negative aspects of Christian morality.

The 'thou shalt not' of the Old Covenant ought to be constantly balanced, or supplemented by the positive requirements of the Gospel as disclosed in the Beatitudes and the Fruits of the Spirit. If we must learn to say No to the solicitations of evil, we must equally learn to say Yes, with our Lady, to those calls which invite
us to cultivate the virtues in whose attainment Christian perfection consists. 'Be it unto me according to thy word.'

The following pages recognize these principles, and offer suggestions as to how these needs may be met in the most helpful way. An unusual supply of alternative forms is provided so as to suit different temperaments. The hidden secrets of the conscience have to be unravelled by more than one device, and the citadel of self-deception stormed by a variety of contrivances; while the forms might well be used in their entirety when some deeper searching of the heart is felt to be desirable at such seasons as Lent, or in times of Retreat.

A more general study of Moral Theology is one of our chief needs at the present day, and we owe a real debt of gratitude to the group of priests who, meeting together for this purpose, have drawn up the following questions as the fruit of their labours. If, encouraged by their example, similar groups could be formed elsewhere, and other departments of the subject elucidated, the results of their deliberations might provide material of very great usefulness to those who have been entrusted with the difficult and anxious task of direction. Since, as St. Gregory reminds us, 'No art is taken in hand to be taught without having been first learned by earnest study. With what rashness, then, is the office of pastoral teaching taken up by the unskilful, quando ars est artium regimen animarum.'

E. A. Down.

The following are submitted by a group of priests, who have found by experience and conference that penitents tend to get into a groove about their self-examination and to acknowledge the same sins, in the same order and often in the same words, time after time. This is often attributed to the habit of using self-examination forms, but perhaps it is due rather to using the same form always. Variety is needed, and depth is required. The forms that follow are planned to afford variety. The well-known eight circumstances of an act enumerated in Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics (III, 1) should be taken into account by the confessor in estimating the gravity of offences and imposing penance. They are:

1. Quis? Agent.
3. Ubi? Place.

The four causes of an act are comprised in the above, for

(1) relates to the efficient cause;
(2) refers to the material cause;
(5) concerns the final cause;
(4) describes the instrumental cause.
I

The Ten Commandments as Interpreted by the Church Catechism

My duty to God
is to—

1. **Believe in Him.**
   - Have I sinned by—
   - Unbelief — wrong belief — superstition — heresy — neglecting to get instruction in religion.

2. **Fear Him.**
   - Lack of reverence—want of attention and devotion in worship—lack of respect for God’s House, His worship, ceremonies, services, etc.

3. **Love Him.**
   - Failure in effort to advance in spiritual life. Am I content with same prayers I have always used? Do I try to deepen my love to God by Meditation, frequent H.C., Retreat (where possible) and earnest prayer?

4. **Worship Him.**

5. **Give Him thanks.**
   - Coldness and ingratitude. Putting pleasure or business before the claim of religion.
Expecting God to do everything for me, and doing nothing to help forward His Kingdom. Meanness. Neglect of Almsgiving.


7. **Call upon Him.** Omission of daily prayer. Indifference. Neglect of prayer for others.

8. **Honour His holy Name and His Word.** Mechanical performance of Religion: unreality and conventionalism. Want of effort in Bible reading. Using God’s Name lightly or speaking flippantly about holy things.

9. **Serve Him truly all the days of my life.** Absence of the spirit of service. Avoiding my fair share of work at home or elsewhere. Unwillingness to work for God and His Church. Resistance to vocation. Lack of perseverance.

My duty to my Neighbour is to—

1. **Love him as myself.** Sins of fancied superiority, contempt for others: pride: selfishness: snobbery: exploitation of others.

2. **Do unto others as I would they should do unto me.** Sins of self-interest: taking unfair advantage of others’ needs: social injustice.

3. **Love, honour and succour my father and mother.** Sins of disobedience at home: inconsiderateness: lack of respect for age: unwillingness to help: refusal to assist those who have a claim on me.

4. **Honour and obey the King and all in authority.** Evasion of law: avoidance of duty as citizens: conniving at illegal acts: rebellion.

5. **Submit myself to all my governors, teachers, spiritual pastors and masters.** Defiance of those appointed to rule: refusal to obey laws of the Church: wilfulness and self-pleasing: private judgment in religion, etc.

6. **Order myself lowly and reverently to all my betters.** Unwillingness to recognize merit in others: Pride and Conceit: Self-satisfaction: Self-assertiveness.

7. **Hurt nobody by word nor deed.** Sins of cruelty: revenge: bad example: deliberate injury or damage.

8. **Be true and just in all my dealing.** Dishonesty in word or act. False impressions. Fraud. Living beyond means. Incurring debts.
3. Leave no malice nor hatred.

10. Keep my hands from picking and stealing and my tongue from evil-speaking, lying and slandering.

Sins against purity: sins of luxury and indulgence.

12. Learn and labour truly to get mine own living and to do my duty...

See No. 7.

Also sins of Scandal, Slander and Detraction. (Scandal = repeating something defamatory but true; slander = setting in motion untrue rumour.)

Sins against purity: sins of luxury and indulgence. Extravagance.

Want of diligence in work and study: failure in duty to superiors — equals — subordinates. Idleness.

II

THE SEVEN CAPITAL SINS


Anger. Have I been deficient in Patience and long-suffering? Been overbearing, cruel, sarcastic? Inflicted hurt on others—bodily or spiritual? Given way to revengeful or jealous thoughts, sullenness, hatred, rage, irritability?

Lust. Have I transgressed against Purity in thought, word, imagination, reading, act? Condoned or spoken lightly of such conduct? Immoderate indulgence in sex gratification?

Envy.


Avarice.

Have I acquired anything—money, goods, etc.—by unfair means? Kept anything back which should be paid? Retained any possessions belonging to others? Refused to share with others? Been niggardly—rapacious—not given to God His due, in Time, Money, Service?

Gluttony.

Have I been guilty of over-indulgence in eating or drinking—luxury—amusements—spent too much on self—avoided self-denial—been slothful—neglected fast days and self-discipline?

III

SELF-EXAMINATION ACCORDING TO THE PRINCIPAL MOTIVES

I. Desire of Knowledge.
II. Desire of Society.
III. Desire of Esteem.
IV. Desire of Power.
V. Desire of Superiority.
VI. Desire of Affection.

Each of these may be:

(1) Defective.
(2) Excessive.
(3) Unbalanced.
(4) Misdirected.

They should be used for:

(1) The glory of God.
(2) The benefit of man.

Hence they suggest a series of self-examination questions as follows:

I. DESIRE OF KNOWLEDGE

(a) By Excess

Pride of intellect, leading to Disbelief Curiosity—Wandering about to different religious bodies instead of loyalty to the One Faith—Reading bad or dangerous literature. Gossip, Scandal, etc. Trivial interests and unworthy pursuits.

(b) By Defect

Apathy—Indifference to Truth—Unwillingness to learn—Lack of progress in self-
knowledge and in knowledge of God's will. Disinclination to advance in the practice of holiness (e.g. as to Retreats). Self-satisfaction and unreceptiveness.

II. Desire of Society
(a) By Excess
   Excessive pleasure-seeking: Extravagance: Fear to speak the truth lest we might give offence. Doing violence to principle in order to stand well with others: Forsaking God's House because companions are indifferent: Hypocrisy: Neglect of home duties in favour of outside claims: Courting popularity by unworthy means (e.g. telling doubtful stories to entertain).
(b) By Defect
   Taking no interest in fellow-worshippers. Keeping away from social gatherings.

III. Desire of Esteem
(a) By Excess
(b) By Defect
   Carelessness about our Example: Indifference to effect on others: Despondency and surrender to a low standard.

IV. Desire of Power
(a) By Excess
   Pursuing wrong or selfish aim: Disobedience: setting self up against Church or other lawful authority: Rebellion against restraint: Hardness and want of sympathy with afflicted: Sins of anger: Domineering and dictatorial conduct.
(b) By Defect
   Laziness: unwillingness to shoulder responsibility: failure to seek God's grace for our tasks: sloth and dilatoriness in making up one's mind.

V. Desire to Excel
(a) By Excess
   Affected superiority: mockery of others: attempts to overreach others: acquisitiveness: unnecessary work to the detriment of religious obligation: dishonesty (i.e. desire to gain advantage over rival by unfair means). Any kind of unscrupulous self-advancement.
(b) By Defect
   Restlessness: worry: letting oneself sink to low level.

VI. Desire of Affection
(a) By Excess
   Idolizing any human being: Neglect of God: Giving up religion to please friend, husband, wife, etc.
Sins of lust: sensual imagination: unlawful desire, etc.
Foolish fondness and indulgence of children.

(b) *By Defect*

Coldness: self-sufficiency: unresponsive attitude to God’s call.

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IV

**SELF-EXAMINATION SUGGESTED BY FEATURES OF THE PASSION**

I. **Our Saviour’s Body** was bruised for our sins of the flesh. Have we hurt Him by:—

Sins of impurity, alone or with others,
excessive indulgence in food or drink,
suggesting evil to, or corrupting others,
sensual thoughts, reading, looking at pictures
or going to entertainments calculated to
stimulate wrong impulses,
immodesty,
unfaithfulness to marriage vows,
want of discipline of body (e.g. ignoring
obligation of fasting when prescribed. Not
keeping regular hours. Not observing
days of abstinence, etc.).

II. **Our Saviour’s Tongue** was parched with thirst for our sins of speech, e.g. :—

Blasphemy.
Coarse or indecent words.
Exaggeration.
Lying.
Excuses.
Improper jokes and stories.
Giving false impressions.
Hypocrisy.
Slander, Scandal or Detraction.
Gossip.
Evil-speaking.
Irreverence or mechanical recitation of sacred words, parodies of Bible, hymns, etc.
Grumbling.

III. Our Saviour's Ears were assailed by blasphemies and curses for our readiness to listen to evil, e.g.:
- Taking part in malicious talk.
- Enjoying depreciation of others.
- Listening to wrong suggestions.
- Listening to disparagement of religion.
- Delighting in base or vicious conversation.

IV. Our Saviour's Brow was crowned with thorns for our sins of the brain and intellect, e.g.:
- Intellectual pride.
- Obstinate prejudice.
- Idle speculation.
- Unwillingness to submit our judgment to the Church's law.
- Arrogance of mind.
- Unfair argument or dishonesty in thought (suppressio veri or suggestio falsi).
- Frittering away mental powers on unworthy interests.
- Refusing to learn and neglecting to get instruction in the Faith.
- Party spirit.
- Misuse of intellect, e.g. sharp practice in business, etc.

V. Our Saviour's Feet were pierced for our sins of wrong direction of our activities, e.g.:

Going to places which conscience bids us avoid, e.g. certain places of entertainment.
Going with people who exercise bad influence over us.
Visiting places of worship where false or misleading beliefs are taught.
Running away from duty our conscience enjoins.
Avoiding persons in need of help or sympathy.
Escaping obligations to parents, dependants, etc.
Over-attention to sport, etc., to the neglect of religious duty.

VI. Our Saviour's Hands were nailed to the Cross for our misuse of bodily powers, e.g.:
- Laziness.
- Cruelty or bullying.
- Injuring others.
- Writing anything malicious.
- Holding or keeping what we ought to part with.
Neglecting to train our powers to use in God's service.
Unwillingness to help at home, at church, etc., especially in uncomgenial tasks.
V

SELF-EXAMINATION BY THE RULE OF THE BEATITUDES

Three beatitudes (‘Blessed are the meek—the merciful—the peacemakers’) relate to outward life, while the other three relate to the interior life (‘pure in heart—mourners—hunger and thirst after righteousness’). These furnish two sets of questions, viz.:

(a) OUTWARD LIFE


(b) INNER LIFE


VI

SELF-EXAMINATION UNDER HEADS OF BODY, MIND AND SPIRIT

Each of us has a body and soul. The latter includes (a) mind and (b) spirit. These are not separate parts of the human constitution, but rather separate functions of one soul.

God has given us a Body to work with, a Mind to think with, a Spirit to feel with.

How have we used them?

I. BODY

Sins of Lust—Sloth—Excess—Intemperance—Violence—Lack of Discipline: Sins of Speech, etc.

II. MIND

Sins of apathy (‘not taking an interest’ is very common, e.g. as regards spiritual things). Carelessness: Inconsiderateness: Culpable forgetfulness: Failure to train mind. Pride. Suspicion. Narrowness. [These sins are often camouflaged, especially Pride.]

III. SPIRIT

VII

SELF-EXAMINATION ACCORDING TO THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT

I. LOVE

Sins against Love are:—
Perversion of love into lust.
Want of fellowship.
Coldness in responding to God’s love through Sloth or Disbelief.
Enmity and Malice.
Vindictiveness and paying off grudges.
Exacting friendships, asking all and giving nothing.
Omission of worship—prayer—sacraments—and means by which the Love of God grows.
Contempt for others.
Impatience with and rebellion against God.

II. JOY

Sins against Joy are:—
Grumbling: Depression: Dwelling on evil things: Morbid delight in talking of misfortune, disease, etc.: Neglect of Praise and Thanksgiving: Looking for bad motives in others: Discontent: False excitement (e.g. Gambling): Laziness (not making the best of oneself or one’s gifts).

III. PEACE

Sins against Peace are:—
Contentiousness: hasty words: strife: provoking to anger: irritability: rage: envy: argumentativeness: assertiveness:

bearing grudges: stirring up disputes: seeking revenge: failure to take precaution against ‘nerves,’ etc., by bodily discipline, reasonable hours, etc. Rendering oneself irritable by unnecessary overwork, attempting too much, etc.

IV. LONG-SUFFERING

Sins against Long-suffering are:—
Want of sympathy: failure to make allowance for others: impatience: lack of effort to understand others’ limitations: quickness to reply to taunts: resentment: imagined slights and affronts: inconsiderateness.

V, VI, VII. GENTLENESS, GOODNESS, MEEEKNESS

Sins against these are:—

VIII. FAITH

Sins against Faith are:—

IX. TEMPERANCE

Sins against Temperance are:—
Excessive indulgence in food—drink—sleep—amusements—travel—expenditure.
Unrestrained thought and imagination: intemperate language: anger: undue partiality and foolish fondness.
VIII

SELF-EXAMINATION according to the CORPORAL AND SPIRITUAL WORKS of MERCY

I. CORPORAL WORKS

Modern equivalents

Feeding the hungry. Practical sympathy.
Clothing the naked. Liberal giving.
Helping the stranger. Service to others, at home, in the world, in the Church.
Visiting the sick. Intelligent interest in others. Willingness to help.
Assisting the orphans. Readiness to do good turns. Remembering the lonely and bereaved.
Burying the dead. Promoting social righteousness.

II. SPIRITUAL WORKS of MERCY

Modern equivalents

Converting the sinner. Supporting the missionary work of the Church.
Instructing the ignorant. Furthering its teaching work. Bearing injuries.
Counselling the doubtful. Assisting at Mass on behalf of good causes.
Comforting the afflicted. Praying for those in trouble.
Forgiving wrongdoers. Doing work for the Church.
Praying for living and dead. Prayer, Fasting and Almsgiving.

IX

SELF-EXAMINATION by the STANDARD of the CARDINAL AND THEOLOGICAL VIRTUES

I. PRUDENCE

Sins against Prudence are:

Foolish favouritism: 'grandes passions': allowing wrong thoughts to rest in mind: indiscreet words: bad examples: betting and speculation: not avoiding occasions of sin: reading bad books: inciting others to sin.

II. TEMPERANCE

Sins of the flesh are:


III. JUSTICE

Sins against Justice are:

Selfishness (i.e. injustice to God by preference of self). Presumption (putting off repentance and forgetting God's justice). Lying: Hypocrisy: disrespect to those entitled to honour (e.g. parents): neglect of family duties and claims: injuring others in body or soul: theft: dishonesty in business: slackness in work: meanness in giving or

IV. FORTITUDE
Sins against Fortitude are:—
Doing wrong for fear of offending others. Hesitating to do right for fear of what it may cost: Despair: Excuses: Cowardice: Irresponsibility and instability: Unwillingness to face discomfort or hard work: Putting off Confession: Discouraging others by disparaging criticism of the Church, etc.

V. FAITH
Sins against Faith are:—

VI. HOPE
Sins against Hope are:—

VII. CHARITY
Sins against Charity are:—

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SELF-EXAMINATION BY THE STANDARD OF THE SEVENFOLD GIFTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Man's faculties are divided into Intellect, Emotion and Will. These are met by the Gifts of the Spirit thus:— Gifts of Wisdom and Understanding are intellect. Counsel and Strength assist the Will. Knowledge (i.e. of God) aid the Emotions. Holy Fear (reverence)

Thus:—

I. COUNSEL AND STRENGTH
Sins of the Will, e.g.:—

II. WISDOM AND UNDERSTANDING
Sins of Intellect, e.g.:—

III. KNOWLEDGE, REVERENCE, GODLINESS
Sins of Emotion, e.g.:—
Discontent: envy: false excitement:
wrong curiosity: morbid desires: fears or
day-dreams: evil thoughts and imaginations:
impure words, thoughts or acts: hatred: all
failure in faith or worship: neglect of Bible,
Church and Sacraments. Irreverence, for-
malism, hypocrisy.

XI

EIGHT WAYS OF PARTICIPATING IN SIN

I. By advice.
II. By command.
III. By encouragement.
IV. By joining in.
V. By not deterring.
VI. By concealing.
VII. By defending.
VIII. By provoking.

Apply these to the Seven Capital Sins, Pride,
Anger, Lust, Sloth, Envy, Avarice, Gluttony.
XII

THE FOUR WOUNDS OF THE SOUL

Theologians are accustomed to distinguish four powers of the soul, viz., Reason, Will, Courage, Desire. But Reason has been afflicted with Ignorance, Will has been wounded with Malice, Courage has been deprived of its proper guide, and Desire has degenerated into Lust, as the result of the Fall. These are the four wounds of Human Nature. Examination under these heads suggests:—

I. REASON

There are four intellectual virtues, viz.:

Intelligence, or the power of perceiving truth where self-evident.
Science, or the power of arriving at it indirectly by inference and deduction.
Wisdom, which distinguishes between the essential and the incidental.
Art, which is practical rather than speculative and aims at the production of good work.

There is room for examination here, for Scripture is severe upon 'the fool,' and want of intelligence is sometimes a sin as well as an infirmity. Again, Wisdom is repeatedly insisted upon in Scripture and a large part of the Bible is concerned with inculcating it. And it is undeniably a common defect to mistake what is trivial and temporary for what is of first importance. Art, in the widest sense, is also a matter for serious inquiry and the production of what is base or shoddy or unworthy should not pass unnoticed in self-examination.

N.B. 'Ignorance' is different from 'nescience.' The former is culpable because there are certain things which a human being is fitted to know and it is expected that he should be informed upon these.

II. WILL

There are seven steps, on five of which the Will may slip, in the commission of an act, viz.:

1. Inclination (involuntary) as in e.g. a propensity to indulgence.
2. Voluntary delight in thinking about the indulgence in question.
3. Constant preoccupation with it (largely involuntary).
4. Definite desire (hardly voluntary).
5. Consent of the Will to try to gain the indulgence.
7. Use of those means.
Self-Examination should scrutinize these.

III. COURAGE

Fortitude, hope, fear and hate belong to this division. Each may be ill-regulated and should be considered especially as regards excess. But it is unwise to dwell too exclusively on feelings, hence acts and motives, rather than general feeling, should form the matter of confession.
IV. Desire, or appetite for pleasure

Besides the customary inquiry as to sins of excess, there should be examination as to attendant dispositions, e.g.:—

(1) *Shame*—the sense of what is base and ought to be avoided.

(2) *Honour*—the sense of reverence for what is pure and becoming.

(3) *Depression*—the habit of mind which dwells unduly on sorrow.