

An Examination of Conscience for Seminarians

by Fr. Dylan James, FatherDJ@gmail.com, 27th Nov 2005

“In what I have done, **and** in what I have failed to do”

-sins of omission may be more serious than sins of commission

Our confession should specify our sins of omission,

e.g. Have I omitted to say my prayers? Omitted to look for and respond to the needs of my fellow seminarians?

In thought, word, and deed

-even if I did not gossip in word, did I judge someone in thought?

Each **area** of my life should be considered: my apostolate, my family, my friends, my roommate, my work, my prayer *etc.*

Anagram: PLACES-G, Pride, Lust, Anger, Covetousness, Envy, Sloth, Gluttony.

We can usually assume that **each** of these capital sins is at work in us in some manner and degree, an examination of conscience should help us see **how**.

Note: The following examination of conscience groups sins according to the capital sins, the seven deadly sins from which other sins typically flow. The same material act may be sinful for different reasons, therefore each person needs to apply this examination to himself carefully.

E.g. An act of lying is wrong, but it might be motivated by the capital sin of vanity (to make you look good), or from the capital sin of sloth/laziness (to avoid work), or from envy (to damage the reputation of another), or from a mixture of all three.

E.g. The material act of giving to the poor can be motivated by charity (virtue) or by vanity (vice). Hence this examination uses the vices to specify our sins.

Pride (ST II-II q162)

Pride is the mother of **all** sin (St. Gregory the Great, c.f. St. Thomas Aquinas *Summa Theologica* II-II q162 a8). It is a craving for excellence beyond what is reasonable, an inordinate desire for one's own superiority (ST II-II q162 a2). Reason requires that a man reach up for what is proportionate to him, and proportionate to his abilities. In pride a man seeks to be more than he should be. It makes a man hate being equal to men, and hate being less than God.

Have I refused to admit my own weaknesses?

Have I sought things beyond me?

Have I dwelt on the failings of others?

Have I judged others? Ranked myself better than others?

Judging: In thought, word, or deed?

Have I hated others?

Have I been stubborn? Refused to admit I was wrong? Refused to accept that another person had a better idea? Have I refused to learn from others?

Have I abused my power by imposing my will/preferences/opinions on those in my care, or on friends?

Have I been insensitive in how I have proclaimed Christ's truths?

Have I been arrogant? Have I held others in contempt?

Have I failed to show respect and obedience to those in authority?

To my rector, staff, spiritual director, professors?

In my inner judgements, and external words, or gossip?

Have I failed to do my duties to my family/parents? E.g. return phone calls, visit, stay in touch? Have I been self-seeking in my time with family at home?

Do I consider what I owe *them*? Have I spent time with them? How have I manifested my concern for them? Have I been forgiving and tolerant of them? Have I scandalized them by bad example?

Pusillanimity –the opposite of pride. False-humility fails to use our gifts.

Have I neglected to use the talents that God has given me?

Have I avoided my duty to deal with difficult people and situations?

Have I failed to witness to the harder teachings of Christ? In morals?

Vanity (ST II-II q132)

Concerns external glory. ‘Glory’ –the good of a person manifested to others. The proper end of glory is: God's glory, and, our neighbour's salvation -these two criteria can test whether our desire for glory is virtuous. **Vanity flows from pride and looks like pride.** Glory can be vain/empty in three ways (a1): The honour/thing sought is itself unworthy; The person from whom you seek it is unworthy; The glory sought is not referred to God.

The 7 daughters of vainglory: Boasting, Deceit (when we do not deserve the praise),

A passion for innovation (so that something ‘new’ makes us look good),

Stubbornness of opinion, Quarrelling, Contention, Disobedience.

Have I acted/joked/given talks more to impress others than to do God's will or to help others? Has my humour and conversation been self-seeking? Have my jokes been unkind? Have I listened to others?

Have I lied or exaggerated to make myself look good?

Have I wasted undue time and money on clothes and appearance?

Is my physical exercise motivated by vanity *or* by health?

Ambition –have I sought recognition and advancement for my own glory, rather than to do God's will?

Have I been content with my lowly position, or have I resented the role that Christ is asking me to fulfil?

Lust (ST II-II q.153; CCC 2351)

“Lust is disordered desire for or inordinate enjoyment of sexual pleasure.

Sexual pleasure is morally disordered when sought for itself, isolated from its procreative and unitive purposes.”(CCC 2351). It is a sin of excess.

“Lust is about the greatest of pleasures, and these absorb the mind more than others” (St. Thomas), so when this goes wrong much goes wrong! But Lust is not the most serious sin –pride is.

The 8 daughters of lust (II-II q.153 a5): Blindness of the mind (because the passions cloud thinking), Rashness, Thoughtlessness, Inconstancy, Self-love, Hatred of God for forbidding lust, Love of the pleasures of this world, Despair of the future world.

Custody of the Eyes: “Whoever looks at a woman with lust for her has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Mt 5:28)

Have I looked at others impurely? With what frequency? Has this led to impure thoughts? What frequency and duration? Have I viewed other people as mere sexual objects rather than as persons to be loved?

Pornography: Have I used the internet, or TV?

Have I flirted/danced impurely/toyed with the feelings of another?

Have I guarded my heart and thoughts against developing affections for particular women? Have I behaved in a way that might tempt romantic affections *from* women? Have I imprudently spent time alone with a woman?

Impure Thoughts: Have I entertained impure thoughts? Briefly, or at length?

With what frequency? On what occasions? (e.g. at night when half-asleep and less culpable, or when fully awake?)

Impure acts: Alone, or with another? What frequency and on what occasions?

Impure touches? Impurity in hugs with others?

Words: Have my jokes, conversation, and flattery been pure?

Have I listened to or told impure jokes, tolerated foul conversation?

Have I encouraged/approved/aided the unchaste acts of others?

Have I failed to witness to Christ's teachings about holy purity?

Have I received Holy Communion while in a state of serious sin?

Have I neglected to seek Confession before Holy Communion?

Modesty –has my dress been an occasion of sin for others?

Have I sought to dress so as to help others avoid sin? Have I sought to flatter myself by drawing improper attention to my body or myself?

Play –Have I been guilty of an excess or deficiency in resting myself in ‘play’?

The soul's rest is in pleasure (ST II-II q168 a2). Have I refused to express mirth at another's humour? (A man who has no humour is an unreasonable burden to his fellow man. ST II-II q168 a4)

Thoughtlessness: Have I thoughtfully considered and planned my actions?

Have I applied the standards of Christ to my actions?

Have I sought to avoid situations of sin?

Intemperance: Have I driven recklessly, broken the speed limit (excessively)?

Have I respected the traffic laws enacted by the legitimate authority?

(‘Fear God and honour the emperor’ 1 Pet 2:17)

Have I driven while under the influence of alcohol?

Anger/Wrath (ST II-II q158)

Anger is undue desire for vengeance –undue in cause or in amount. Anger can be just or unjust: punishment can be too much or too little, it can even not be deserved at all; it can be measured out by someone who does not have the authority to give it. Anger through zeal can be dangerous, and cloud later judgments.

The 6 daughters of wrath: Indignation (we deem the one we are angry with to be unworthy), Swelling of the mind (as it fills with plots of revenge), Injurious words against our neighbour, Excessive *manner* of words against someone, Blasphemy, Quarrelling.

Lack of due anger: “unreasonable patience is the hotbed of many vices, it fosters negligence, and incites not only the wicked but even the good to do wrong” (II-II q158 a8). Note the just anger of Christ cleansing the Temple: ‘Zeal for thy house will consume me.’ (Ps. 68:10): “How dare you turn my Father's house into a market!” (John 2:15-16)

Have I tolerated abuses against others or against God? (lack of anger)

Have I harboured resentment and hatred in my thoughts?
Have I imagined bad conversations to nurture my anger?
Have I judged rashly? Have I plotted revenge?
Have I sought to be a peace-maker?
Have I been physically violent?
Have I refused or been slow or ungracious in forgiving?
Have I insulted people? Quarrelled with people? Lost my temper?

Impatience: How have I carried my cross?

Have I been impatient with people, events, sufferings, sicknesses?

Covetousness/Avarice (ST II-II q118)

Avarice is the excessive love of possessing things (a1). It is contrary to reason and due measure. Material goods are only useful in helping us towards an end; to desire them in themselves in an evil. ‘The love of money is the root of all evil’ (1 Tim 6:10) –i.e. it is a capital sin.

The 7 daughters of avarice: Hard-heartedness to the poor, Insensitivity to mercy, Dissatisfaction in thoughts, Restlessness in deeds, Violence (to acquire things), Falsehood (in words, including perjury), Fraud (in transactions), Treachery (as in the case of Judas).

Diocesan priestly living demands ‘**simplicity of life**’, the avoidance of ‘anything which could have an air of vanity’ (*Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, n.67), and a particular configuration to ‘imitate the mystery you celebrate: model your life on the mystery of the Lord’s Cross’ (Ordination Rite).

Have I sought to be poor, as Christ became poor for us (2 Cor 8:9)?

Have I been overly concerned about my own comfort and well-being?

Have I sought to have *the Lord* as my priestly inheritance (Num 18:20), or have I looked for earthly satisfactions?

Have I lived inner detachment from the world and its fading glories?

Have I been resentful of my lack of money?

Have I been generous in giving, even out of my own poverty, especially to the poor? Have I given with a cheerful heart?

Have I sought to deny myself those worldly activities that are unbecoming of a priest? Have I considered what these are?

Has my dining out, living quarters, transportation, car, vacations *etc* eliminated ‘any kind of affectation and luxury’?

Have I cheated, stolen, or failed to pay my bills on time?

Have I borrowed without permission?

Have I been honest in my dealings with others?

Have I used people for my own ends and advantage?

Have I wasted money on unnecessary expenses or gambling?

Various other sins against justice:

Have I failed to keep secrets?

Murder, Theft, Cheating, Contempt for others, Backbiting, Tale-bearing, Derision, Cursing, Boasting, Flattery, Quarrelling.

Envy (ST II-II q36)

Envy or Jealousy –is sadness at the happiness or good of another

The 5 Daughters of envy: Hatred (love desires the good of another), Tale-bearing (to lower a man’s reputation), Detraction, Joy at our neighbour’s misfortunes, Grief at our neighbour’s prosperity.

Gossip and Sins of Speech:

Every man has a right to a good name. A man’s good name is his most precious social possession. Without it he cannot function in society: people will not trust him, will not talk to him, will despise him *etc*. Every man thus has a right to a good name and we do not have a right to take this away from someone. Even when we are accurately describing someone’s bad characteristics we are still depriving him of the good name that he has a right to.

Slander/Calumny –telling an untruth about someone

Detraction –telling a truth about someone that lessens his reputation/good name.

Have I envied the abilities, talents, ideas, plans, good-looks, intelligence, clothes, car, possessions, friends *etc* of another person?

Detraction: Have I damaged the reputation of another?

By deeds/looks/words have I caused others to have a lower opinion of someone else?

Slander: Have I exaggerated/lie about the faults of others?

Have I repeated accusations that might not be true?

Gossip: Have I led others to gossip?

Have I neglected to change the conversation/avoid conversation with others who are gossiping?

Have I failed to defend the reputation of others?

Thoughts: Have I mentally judged others?

I.e. internal detraction/slander/gossip of the mind.

Have I borne hatred for another?

Have I been guilty of deception?

Do I despise others of different race, class or culture?

Lies: Have I told lies out of envy (to damage another’s reputation), laziness (to avoid work), or vanity (to make me look good)?

Sloth/Apathy (ST II-II q35)

Sloth is spiritual sorrow in the face of spiritual good, it is an oppressive sorrow that weighs on a man’s mind and makes him **want to do nothing** (a1). To not take joy in a good is a bad thing!

It is **laziness in the things of God**.

The 6 Daughter of sloth: Despair (by avoiding our ultimate end of God), Faint-heartedness (in the quest for sanctity), Sluggishness about the commandments, Spite (as in indignation –against other men who do seek sanctity), Malice (as a consequence of spite), Wandering after unlawful things (“Those who find no joy in spiritual pleasures have recourse to pleasures of the body” (a4)). Isidore adds: Idleness, drowsiness, uneasiness of mind, restlessness of body, instability, loquaciousness (talking too much), curiosity.

Have I sought God above all else, or have I put other priorities (e.g. friendships, clerical ambition, comfort and ease) ahead of him?

Have I got so caught up in the things of this world that I have forgotten God?

Have I risked losing my faith by bad company, bad reading, cowardice, pride?

Have I trusted God, especially in times of difficulty?

Have I kept the Lord’s Day holy?

Have I worked needlessly on Sunday?

Have I omitted some part of my plan of life: daily Mass, Breviary, daily Holy Hour, mental prayer, daily Rosary, spiritual reading *etc*?

Have I received Holy Communion reverently?

Have I made a due preparation before Mass begins?

Have I made an appropriate thanksgiving after Mass?

Have I entertained distractions in prayer, or failed to give God due concentration in prayer, or rushed my Rosary or the Office?

(Note: Not giving God the **effort** he deserves in prayer is a sin, but it is not the same thing as *involuntary* weakness in mental distractions.)

Have I fallen asleep in prayer due to lack of effort and discipline in getting to sleep on time? Have I gone to sleep on time?

Have I, due to lack of effort and discipline, lacked the sleep I need to study, engage in apostolate, and live charity to my neighbour?

Have I sinned against God by taking his name in vain?

Have I caused scandal to others by using foul language?

Have I given scandal by setting a bad example to others by my sloth?

Has my behaviour or words led others to sin?

Have I set the good example Christ expects of a seminarian?

Laziness: Have I neglected the duties of my apostolate?

Have I been negligent/**sloppy**/half-hearted in my study & apostolate?

Have I procrastinated (e.g. with email), avoiding more serious priorities?

Have I wasted time? On social media, or useless TV, or in pointless internet surfing, on my smartphone or tablet?

Am I just, hardworking and honest in my work?

Have I sought to help my fellow seminarians? Have I been attentive to their needs?

Have I prayed for others, or only for myself?

Words: Has my conversation been focussed on my own pleasure, or on others?

Has my humour been insensitive/offensive to others?

Punctuality: Have I sinned against my neighbour by being late for meetings?

Have I wasted other people’s time by being late or unprepared?

Have I sinned against God by being late for Mass or prayers?

Gluttony (ST II-II q148)

Gluttony is the inordinate desire for food, unregulated by reason, knowingly exceeding need, for the sake of pleasure.

Gluttony tempts us in 5 ways: To seek food that is too much, too fancy, too expensive, to eat at improper/excessive times, or in hasty manner, or in a manner lacking manners & social consideration.

The 5 daughters of gluttony: Dullness of mind (whereas abstinence sharpens wits), Unseemly joy (the appetites get disordered), Idle talk, Scurrilous behaviour (because reason is dulled and bad behaviour follows), Bodily uncleanness.

Have I eaten more than I need? To how serious an extent?

Have I sought food with undue concentration?

Have I eaten with undue haste and lack of consideration of others?

Have I neglected the food needs of others at the table? (e.g. do I always take the last cookie)

Have I spent undue amounts of money on food?

Have I practiced fasting and self-denial, especially on Fridays and other fast days?

Have I fasted before receiving Holy Communion at Mass?

Is my heart set on pleasure and amusement?

Drunkenness: Drunkenness impairs our use of reason. Reason is a gift of God, and is thus rejected in drunkenness. Drunkenness lowers us to the level of the animals, it makes us incapable of virtuous acts, incapable of charity to others, it makes us incapable of knowing right from wrong.

Have I drunk alcohol to excess? Repeatedly?

Have I used prudence to *plan* the quantity of my drinking?

The Ten Commandments:

I, the Lord, am your God. You shall not have other gods besides me. You shall not take the name of the Lord God in vain. Remember to keep holy the Lord's Day.

Honour your father and your mother. You shall not kill. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not covet your neighbour's wife. You shall not covet your neighbour's goods.