

## **Knowledge of Self** **Fr. Thomas Steinke, IVE**

**Everyone who wants to make serious progress in the spiritual life must deepen their knowledge of God and their knowledge of self. Hence, Marian Consecration has a preparation period whereby we seek to enhance our knowledge of Jesus Christ (i.e., God) and another where we endeavor to deepen our knowledge of self. In order to understand an object (in this case, ourselves), we need to know how it came about.**

**Scholastic philosophy teaches that there are four causes for a thing's existent, viz., the material, formal, efficient, and final cause. The material cause is the matter of which a thing consists. A nice chalice is made of silver, gold, precious stones, and other metals. The formal cause is the idea or blueprint of the thing. A chalice has a broad base, a thinner stem, and a wide cup with much variation according to the conception of the artisan. The efficient cause is the moving cause, what brings something about. The efficient cause of the chalice is the artificer, the one who made it. The final cause is the purpose of a thing. The final cause of a chalice is to hold the precious blood of Jesus Christ.**

**Now in applying these four causes to man, the material cause is the body. The formal cause is the soul, the immaterial part of man. The efficient cause is God, but more proximately, your parents. They function as co-creators: the body is from the parents and God creates the immaterial soul at conception. The final cause of man is the beatific vision.<sup>1</sup>**

**Since God creates the immortal soul at conception and the purpose of our life is to share in the vision of God for all eternity, the knowledge of God and the knowledge of self are inseparable. God has revealed the fullness of the truth about our origin and the purpose of our life through the teachings of the Catholic Church. Pope St. John Paul II says that Christ the Lord, “in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, *fully reveals man to himself* and brings to light his most high calling”<sup>2</sup> That is why Leon Bloy is correct in saying that “The holier a woman is, the more she is a woman.”<sup>3</sup> St. Ignatius of Antioch wrote a letter to the Roman citizens pleading with them not to interfere with his upcoming martyrdom. He says, “Let me attain pure light. Only on my arrival there can I be fully a human being.”<sup>4</sup> Ignatius has the proper perspective. He is eagerly seeking the goal and perfection of human existence in the life to come.<sup>5</sup>**

### **No True Self-Knowledge without Divine Grace**

**Hence, there can be no deep understanding of oneself without revelation from God. The most fundamental principle of understanding revelation from God and hence oneself is sanctifying grace, the life of God in one's soul. It is the divinely ordained means to educate man about himself. The Second Vatican Council teaches that to assent to the truth revealed**

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<sup>1</sup> Dr. Taylor Marshall, Aristotle's Four Causes and How it Applies to Your Body and Soul, <https://taylormarshall.com/2012/09/aristotles-four-causes-and-how-it.html>

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, #8.

<sup>3</sup> Gress, Carrie. *The Anti-Mary Exposed: Rescuing the Culture from Toxic Femininity* (Kindle Locations 2144-2145). TAN Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Office of Readings for the Feast of St. Ignatius of Antioch, From St Ignatius of Antioch's letter to the Romans.

<sup>5</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1726.

by God, we need the grace of God to precede and assist our hearts in turning to God.<sup>6</sup> Fr. Chad Ripperger explains that, “The principle way that we are going to know ourselves is through grace. Grace enlightens the mind and strengthens the will. And so one of the principal things it is going to do is enlighten our minds about ourselves.”<sup>7</sup> Now the primary means of receiving sanctifying grace are the sacraments of the Catholic Church. Hence, the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, Holy Communion, and the Sacrament of Reconciliation are the most powerful means of nourishing the soul with grace and the corresponding light to understand reality.

### What is Sanctifying Grace?

Just what is sanctifying grace? Sanctifying grace is a being, a thing that exists. It is invisible in itself, but visible in its effects. The infused virtue of faith always accompanies the gift of sanctifying grace.<sup>8</sup> “Faith unites us to God, and makes us share in His thought and in His life.”<sup>9</sup> There are levels of knowledge in man: sense knowledge, rational knowledge and supernatural knowledge. The supernatural knowledge is the highest form of knowledge and that is why no one can understand reality/ themselves without understanding divine revelation.

The grace of God gives one a new divine perspective on life. The *Imitation of Christ* says that, “As you are within, so will you interpret reality.”<sup>10</sup> St. Augustine talks about the different attitudes of the children of light (i.e., those who are in union with God) and the children of darkness in his classic work *The City of God*. He says, “two cities have been formed by two loves: the earthly by the love of self, even to the contempt of God; the heavenly by the love of God, even to the contempt of self.”<sup>11</sup>

The *Imitation of Christ* explains the worldview of someone who does not have the grace of God in his or her soul versus someone who does. The following is a good examination of conscience as to whether your worldview is secular or divine.

The *Imitation* says that nature always labors for its own advantage in its relations with others, whereas grace looks to the common good. Nature wants reverence and honor, but grace ascribes all honor and glory to God. Nature fears contempt, but grace rejoices to suffer for the name of Jesus. Nature loves ease and comfort, but grace embraces labor. Nature seeks to possess the best of everything, but grace delights in simple, humble and inexpensive things. Nature has high regard for things of this world and is upset if it loses something or is insulted, but grace seeks eternal things and remains at peace despite temporal losses or harsh words. Nature wants to receive rather than give, whereas grace believes it is more blessed to give than to receive. Nature always seeks comforts of the flesh, whereas grace seeks comfort in God alone. Nature rejoices in being of noble birth and in

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<sup>6</sup> Second Vatican Council, *Dei Verbum*, #5.

<sup>7</sup> Fr. Chad Ripperger, Conference on Self-Knowledge, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxzRmjHSG1A>

<sup>8</sup> O.P., JORDAN AUMANN. *Spiritual Theology* (Kindle Locations 1752-1753, 1806-1809). Kindle Edition.

<sup>9</sup> Tanqueray, Adolphe. *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, 1175. 2 °, (Kindle Locations 12394-12396). TAN Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>10</sup> Kempis, Thomas a. *The Imitation of Christ: The Beatitudes Edition* (p. 189). Barrington Publications. Kindle Edition.

<sup>11</sup> St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 14: Chapter 28. Augustine, Saint (2011-08-03). *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine: The Confessions, On Grace and Free Will, The City of God, On Christian Doctrine, Expositions on the Book Of Psalms, ...* (50 Books With Active Table of Contents) (Kindle Locations 13918-13923). . Kindle Edition.

being powerful, whereas grace esteems a virtuous life as best rejoicing in what is true and good. Nature seeks to be wealthy, but grace prefers a poor, simple lifestyle. Nature looks at everything in reference to self; grace refers everything back to God. Nature is eager to know secrets, hear all kinds of gossip, and appear intelligent, but grace restrains the use of the senses and is unconcerned with seeking praise from others.<sup>12</sup>

St. Augustine says that “The earthly city, which does not live by faith, seeks . . . to attain the things which are helpful to this life.”<sup>13</sup> He says that “It grieves them [i.e., worldly people] more to own a bad house than a bad life, as if it were man's greatest good to have everything good but himself.”<sup>14</sup> St. Paul says, “Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools . . . They exchanged the truth about God for a lie, and worshiped and served created things rather than the Creator” (Romans 1:22-25). How many people here in Silicon Valley think a big house and a nice car take precedence over becoming a good person through self-forgetful love? They are deceived. They are worshiping and serving created things. They do not understand the purpose of this short life.

Aristotle teaches that we don't understand something in the deepest way unless we know its cause.<sup>15</sup> Once again, in our case, the cause is God. In the classic work *Self-Knowledge and Self-Discipline*, Fr. Basil Maturin says knowledge of God is at once a condition and an effect of knowledge of self. “The more we grow in the knowledge of God the deeper our knowledge of self, and if we would attain to any knowledge of God there must be some knowledge of self.”<sup>16</sup> St. Teresa of Avila says, “However high a state the soul may have attained, self-knowledge is incumbent upon it<sup>17</sup> . . . [and] we shall never succeed in knowing ourselves unless we seek to know God.”<sup>18</sup> Frank Sheed emphasizes the futility of life without any knowledge of God in his spiritual classic *Theology and Sanity*. He says that

To overlook God's presence is not simply to be irreligious; it is a kind of insanity, like overlooking anything else that is actually there. . . God is . . . a fact. Not to see Him is to be wrong about everything, which includes being wrong about one's self. It does not require any extreme of religious fanaticism for a man to want to know what he is: and this he cannot know without some study of the Being who alone brought him into existence and holds him there.<sup>19</sup>

In summary, one cannot understand oneself unless one know one's origin and purpose in life, which is what the Catholic Church teaches. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that, “Believing is possible only by grace and the interior helps of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>20</sup> If you have lost sanctifying grace through mortal sin after baptism, you must receive absolution from a priest in confession to restore the grace of God in your soul.<sup>21</sup> The Catechism is clear: “The whole power of the sacrament of Penance consists in restoring us to God's

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<sup>12</sup> Kempis, Thomas à. *The Imitation of Christ* (Illustrated) (pp. 112-113). . Kindle Edition.

<sup>13</sup> St. Augustine. *City of God* (p. 627). Waxkeep Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>14</sup> St. Augustine, *City of God*, Book 3, Chapter 1: When the Gods were Worshipped. Augustine, Saint (2011-08-03). *The Complete Works of Saint Augustine: The Confessions, On Grace and Free Will, The City of God, On Christian Doctrine, Expositions on the Book Of Psalms, ...* (50 Books With Active Table of Contents) (Kindle Locations 3932-3935). . Kindle Edition.

<sup>15</sup> Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*, Book 1, Part 2, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/posterior.mb.txt>

<sup>16</sup> Maturin, Basil. *Self-knowledge and self-discipline* (Kindle Locations 21-23). London, New York [etc.]: Longmans, Green and co. Kindle Edition.

<sup>17</sup> St. Teresa of Avila; Peers, E. Allison. *Interior Castle*, Chapter 2 (p. 22). Wilder Publications. Kindle Edition.

<sup>18</sup> St. Teresa of Avila; Peers, E. Allison. *Interior Castle*, Chapter 2 (p. 23). Wilder Publications. Kindle Edition.

<sup>19</sup> Sheed, Frank (2014-02-03). *Theology and Sanity* (p. 7). Catholic Way Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>20</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, #154.

<sup>21</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1446.

grace and joining us with him in an intimate friendship. Reconciliation with God is thus the purpose and effect of this sacrament.”<sup>22</sup>

**First point. If you don’t regularly go to confession, you don’t understand who you are, where you come from, or what your purpose in life is. Such a person would certainly classify as being ignorant about themselves. Their self-knowledge is limited to the vision of fallen unaided human nature, a condition with potentially horrifying consequences. Once again, I quote Frank Sheed who says that**

Sanity, remember, does not mean living in the same world as everyone else; it means living in the real world. But some of the most important elements in the real world can be known only by the revelation of God, which it is theology’s business to study. Lacking this knowledge, the mind must live a half-blind life, trying to cope with a reality most of which it does not know is there. This is a wretched state for an immortal spirit, and pretty certain to lead to disaster.<sup>23</sup>

**We see the disastrous effects of atheism in Communist countries like the Soviet Union, China, and Cambodia. Alexander Solzhenitsyn suffered through one of the most brutal regimes in the history of the world. After decades of research into its cause, he has this to say: “if I were asked today to formulate as concisely as possible the main cause of the ruinous [Russian] Revolution that swallowed up some sixty million of our people, I could not put it more accurately than to repeat: Men have forgotten God; that’s why all this has happened.”<sup>24</sup> In our day, Satan has made stunning headway in deceiving the human race that the Christian God, i.e., the True God, should have no influence on people. Practically speaking, men have forgotten about God. So don’t expect the killing of babies, the elderly, the handicapped, the mass murders of innocent people, the persecution of Christians, and other evils of our time to abate until men turn back to God. Christian morals will return to favor during the Triumph of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, not before.**

### Mary’s Role in helping us Understand our Purpose in Life

**St. Louis Marie De Montfort says that, “of all God’s creatures Mary is the most conformed to Jesus. It therefore follows that, of all devotions, devotion to her makes for the most effective consecration and conformity to him.”<sup>25</sup> Pope Pius IX in his Apostolic Constitution *Ineffabilis Deus* said that even at the start, her holiness was so great that “none greater under God can be thought of, and no one but God can comprehend it”!<sup>26</sup>**

**Holiness and charity are synonymous and Aquinas says that, “where there is the greater charity, there is the more desire; and desire in a certain degree makes the one desiring apt and prepared to receive the object desired.”<sup>27</sup> In other words, when we have an interior disposition to follow God’s promptings out of love of God, He reveals His secrets to us. This is simply the fulfillment of the words of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John: “whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him” (John 14:21). Mary, in turn, helps us to be docile to the teachings of Christ. At the Wedding Feast in**

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<sup>22</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1468.

<sup>23</sup> Sheed, Frank (2014-02-03). *Theology and Sanity* (p. 1). Catholic Way Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>24</sup> Donald R. McClarey, “Culture Without God,” *The American Catholic*, <http://the-american-catholic.com/2013/11/15/culture-without-god/>.

<sup>25</sup> Louis Marie de Montfort, *True Devotion to the Blessed Virgin*, #120, (Bay Shore: Montfort Publications, 1980), 59.

<sup>26</sup> Pope Pius IX, *Ineffabilis Deus*, <http://www.papalencyclicals.net/Pius09/p9ineff.htm>

<sup>27</sup> Aquinas *ST*, I-II, q. 2, a.6, c.: “quia ubi est maior caritas, ibi est maius desiderium; et desiderium quodammodo facit desiderantem aptum et paratum ad susceptionem desiderati” (Leon. 4.126).

Cana, Mary told the stewards to “Do whatever he tells you” (John 2:5). St. Teresa of Calcutta would pray that Our Lady would “lend her heart” that she might love her Lord and her neighbor in the way Mary did.<sup>28</sup> St. Maximilian Kolbe says that, “we have heard of persons who are . . . possessed by the devil, through whom the devil thinks, speaks, [and] acts. We want to be obsessed in this way . . . by her: may she herself think, speak, and act through us.”<sup>29</sup> Of course, when Mary works through us consecrated souls, it will be in accord with God’s plan for humanity. St. Alphonsus Liguori says that through Mary, one “is given the light of truth.”<sup>30</sup> St. Bernard is clear: “Following Mary, you cannot go astray.”<sup>31</sup>

Conversely, a universally and historically common theme among Protestants who have deeply strayed from basic Biblical teachings is that they show disdain for devotion to the Mother of God. Martin Luther had an outright hatred for the rosary calling it a “stupid work.”<sup>32</sup> Ridiculing devotion to the Mother of God is a certain sign that the devil has infiltrated into one’s thinking. St. Bonaventure says, “Oh, how the devils in hell tremble at Mary!”<sup>33</sup> It is not good to try to do battle against demons without the Queen of Angels on your side. That’s why those who do not venerate Mary keep buckling under diabolic pressure. First contraception, then fornication, then abortion, then euthanasia, then gay marriage, and now incredibly many nitwits out there don’t even believe God created man male and female. That seems silly to any mind not darkened by sin. Nobody can have deep union with Our Lady and believe these moral aberrations are true and good.

### We Determine Our Eternal Destiny

With regard to self-knowledge in general, it is important to understand that with our free will, we can perform good or evils actions, and these actions determine what kind of individual being we become. The Catechism of the Catholic Church says, “Freedom is the power, rooted in reason and will, to act or not to act, to do this or that, and so to perform deliberate actions on one’s own responsibility. By free will one shapes one’s own life. Human freedom is a force for growth and maturity in truth and goodness; it attains its perfection when directed toward God, our beatitude.”<sup>34</sup>

The Thomistic axiom *Agere sequitur esse* (“Action follows being”) has the connotation that our actions follow upon what kind of person we have become. But it also works in reverse. Our actions determine what kind of being we become. If we follow God’s inspirations, we become god-like, if we follow Satan’s temptations, we become evil. To know and follow God’s will, it is necessary to acquire the virtue of prudence. St. Thomas Aquinas following Aristotle defined prudence as right reason applied to action (*recta ratio agibilium*).<sup>35</sup> He says that the “aptitude for prudence is in our nature, while its perfection comes through practice or grace”<sup>36</sup> We have to practice virtue, but we need God’s grace to do that.

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<sup>28</sup> Joseph Langford, MC (2007-10-24). *Mother Teresa: In the Shadow of Our Lady* (p. 47). Our Sunday Visitor. Kindle Edition.

<sup>29</sup> Kolbe, St. Maximilian (2013-05-28). *Let Yourself Be Led by the Immaculate* (Kindle Locations 438-439). Angelus Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>30</sup> De Liguori, Saint Alphonsus. *The Glories of Mary* (p. 245). Catholic Way Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>31</sup> De Liguori, Saint Alphonsus. *The Glories of Mary* (p. 495). Catholic Way Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>32</sup> Anne Winston-Allen, *Stories of the Rose: The Making of the Rosary in the Middle Ages* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 130.

<sup>33</sup> De Liguori, Saint Alphonsus. *The Glories of Mary* (p. 102). Catholic Way Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>34</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church, #1731.

<sup>35</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 47, a. 2, sed contra.

<sup>36</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 49, a. 1, ad 2.

Following St. Augustine, we say that, “We must pray as if everything depends on God and act as if everything depends on us.”<sup>37</sup> This is a good summary of the proper mindset of a human being.

### Humility and Self-Knowledge

Nevertheless, prayer and humility are the foundation principles of self-knowledge. Grace is a gratuitous gift so a humble dependence on God for everything is necessary to understand reality and thus our condition on earth. Jesus told St. Faustina that, “humility is nothing but the truth.”<sup>38</sup> And when Jesus says that, “without me you can do nothing” (John 15:5), He is speaking the Truth. St. Teresa of Avila concurs saying that “to be humble is to walk in truth, for it is absolutely true to say that we have no good thing in ourselves, but only misery and nothingness; and anyone who fails to understand this is walking in falsehood.”<sup>39</sup> God the Father told St. Catherine of Sienna that “Humility proceeds from self-knowledge” and that humble souls produce the greatest works in which God take delight.<sup>40</sup> God alone converts heart, we strive only to be His instruments.

Accordingly, we will never do great things in the spiritual realm unless we have this humble dependence on God. St. Augustine says that no one ought to rely on his own feelings when he speaks out, nor be confident in his own strength when he undergoes temptation. For whenever we speak prudently, our wisdom comes from God. Whenever we endure evils courageously, our long-suffering also comes from Him.<sup>41</sup> Lacking an interior understanding of our absolute dependence on God indicates that we have an inflated and false view of ourselves. This is dangerous for a creature whose salvation is by grace alone (Eph. 2:8).

### Discovering Your Unique God-given Vocation

Moreover, each of us has a mission in life. Hence, our self-knowledge is fundamentally incomplete if we do not discover our unique God-given vocation. Pope Benedict XVI says that, “Every person carries within himself a project of God, a personal vocation, a personal idea of God on what he is required to do in history to build his Church . . . And the priest’s role is above all. . . to help the individual discover his personal vocation, God’s task for each one of us.”<sup>42</sup>

How does one discover one’s vocation? God gives us natural talents and we need to use those talents for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. This is one of the meanings of *The Parable of the Talents*. St. Jerome says that, “In the five, two, and one talent, we recognize the diversity of gifts wherewith we have been entrusted.”<sup>43</sup> Pope St. Paul VI in his encyclical entitled *On the Development of Peoples* said that, “In God’s plan, every man is

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<sup>37</sup> St. Augustine, *St. Augustine Quotes*, [http://thinkexist.com/quotation/pray\\_as\\_though\\_everything\\_depended\\_on\\_god-work\\_as/149654.html](http://thinkexist.com/quotation/pray_as_though_everything_depended_on_god-work_as/149654.html)

<sup>38</sup> St. Faustina, *Diary: Divine Mercy in my Soul*, #1502.

<sup>39</sup> St. Teresa of Avila; Peers, E. Allison. *Interior Castle* (p. 140). Wilder Publications. Kindle Edition.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine of Siena, Saint. *The Dialogue of Saint Catherine* of Siena (Kindle Locations 607-608; 671-674). Kindle Edition.

<sup>41</sup> St. Augustine, Sermon Christ the King of Martyrs, Office of Readings on the Memorial of St. Vincent, Deacon and Martyr, January 23<sup>rd</sup>, <http://www.liturgies.net/saints/vincent/readings.htm>

<sup>42</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, Pastoral Visit to the Parish of St. Felicity and Her Children, Martyrs, Fifth Sunday of Lent (March 25, 2007), available from vatican.va.

<sup>43</sup> Aquinas, Thomas. *The Golden Chain* (Catena Aurea) (Kindle Locations 14029-14030). Fig. Kindle Edition.

born to seek self-fulfillment, for every human life is called to some task by God. At birth a human being possesses certain aptitudes and abilities in germinal form, and these qualities are to be cultivated so that they may bear fruit. By developing these traits through formal education of personal effort, the individual works his way toward the goal set for him by the Creator.”<sup>44</sup>

Accordingly, our discernment process includes identifying our God-given inclinations and aptitudes and then thinking about how we can best employ them for the glory of God and the salvation of souls. So we should ask ourselves, “What am I good at?” “What are the gifts that God has given me?” Our vocation should be something that we have both an aptitude for and a desire to do. St. Therese said, “God made me always desire what he wanted.”<sup>45</sup> I always say that God has to put your vocation into your heart in some way. There should be peace of heart following any vocational decision.

In my opinion, the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola is the best aid to discern one’s vocation in life. Fr. Herbert Alphonso, S.J., in his book *The Personal Vocation* notes that the Spiritual Exercises are about discerning one’s personal vocation according to each individual nature—“one’s unrepeatably unique and specific way of actually disposing oneself for the Lord.”<sup>46</sup> The meditations help not only to rid oneself of inordinate attachments, but also to look at life from the eternal perspective. In one of the meditations, Ignatius asks you to consider which decision you wish you would have made if you were on your deathbed, or which decision you wish you would have made if you were on the judgment seat in the presence of Jesus Christ.<sup>47</sup> As part of the election process, one is to weigh the pros and cons of the states of life you are considering and the pros and cons should take into account how I can best serve the Lord with my unique set of God-given talents in light of eternity. St. Ignatius says then “I will consider which alternative appears more reasonable.”<sup>48</sup> God has given us the faculty of reason to discern the Truth and we always need to act in accord with right reason enlightened by faith.

### Frequent Confession increases Self-Knowledge

Pius XII in his encyclical *On the Mystical Body of Christ* earnestly recommends frequent confession as a way to grow rapidly in holiness. He says that “By it genuine self-knowledge is increased, Christian humility grows, bad habits are corrected, spiritual neglect and tepidity are resisted, the conscience is purified, the will strengthened, a salutary self-control is attained, and grace is increased in virtue of the sacrament itself.”<sup>49</sup>

This passage points out some ways that self-knowledge is increased by frequent confession. First, Christian humility grows. We become more humble when we examine our conscience and realize how often we fall into sin, when we realize how dependent we are on God.

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<sup>44</sup> Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, #15

<sup>45</sup> St. Therese of Lisieux, *Her Last Conversations*, trans. John Clarke (Washington, D.C.: Institute of Carmelite Studies, 1977), 94.

<sup>46</sup> Herbert Alphonso, *The Personal Vocation: Transformation in Depth Through the Spiritual Exercises* (Rome: Gregorian & Biblical Press, 2006), 92.

<sup>47</sup> Ignatius of Loyola. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph* (Kindle Locations 595-601). Kindle Edition.

<sup>48</sup> Ignatius of Loyola. *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius: Based on Studies in the Language of the Autograph*, #182 (Kindle Locations 588-590). Kindle Edition.

<sup>49</sup> Pope Pius XII, *Mystici Corporis*, 88, [http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_p-xii\\_enc\\_29061943\\_mystici-corporis-christi.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi.html).

Secondly, without the grace we receive from frequent confession, we will become blind with respect to our own failings and weaknesses. Every priest has seen the deadened conscience of penitents who do not go to confession frequently. They have no idea that many of their actions like fornication, contraception, or missing Mass on Sunday are gravely sinful. With frequent confession, the conscience becomes more sensitive to sin. A delicate conscience is one that intuitively knows God's will. It is attune to the finer points of the spiritual life, like choosing the better thing to do in a given situation. The increase or influx of sanctifying grace received in confession not only strengthens the will, but also enlightens the mind. Grace helps us see reality in accord with the mind of God.

### The Importance of Knowing and Monitoring our Interior Disposition for Growth in Holiness

At the exorcist conference in the Philippines I attended a couple years, exorcists said that they are able to free around 80% of the people who are possessed by demons. Apparently, the biggest obstacle is that they are unable to liberate a person if they will not renounce the sin/opening. The same applies to you and me. If we haven't totally renounced a sin, Satan will keep going there. St. Ignatius of Loyola that when we are in the habit of committing sensual sins the devil fills the "imagination with sensual delights and gratifications"<sup>50</sup> and this causes us to fall. Hence, some people habitually fall into sins like gluttony or sexual sins.

In his book about spiritual direction, Fr. Thomas Dubay lists forty-four conditions for making serious progress on the road to sanctity and the number one reason is determination. He says, "Saints are not born saints. They do not have a superior human nature. The difference lies in their resolution."<sup>51</sup> The Council of Trent teaches that, "the Holy Ghost distributes to everyone . . . according to each one's disposition and cooperation."<sup>52</sup> In other words, if you are not growing in holiness, it's because of your mindset.

Hence, self-knowledge entails an understanding of my mindset in relation to God. How do I know what my mindset is? Jesus says that "The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil" (Luke 6:45). Earlier I mentioned the Latin phrase *Agere sequitur esse* ("Action follows being"). Its principal meaning is that a person's actions reveal what kind of person one is. In other words, one's interior life will be manifest in one's conduct. If you want to understand yourself, focus on what you do. In relation to you and me, if there is a defect in our thoughts or desires, it will show in our actions. Hence, we can significantly increase our self-knowledge by doing a regular examination of conscience. This is especially important because our habitual sins become like a second nature and we tend to underestimate how often we fall into them. Indeed, studies show that people can accurately predict their behavior if habits are weak, but not when habits are strong. When habits are strong, people universally tend to underestimate how often they fall into the habitual behavior.

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<sup>50</sup> The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola, #314.

<sup>51</sup> Fr. Thomas Dubay, *Seeking Spiritual Direction*, (Cincinnati: Servant Books, 1993), 248.

<sup>52</sup> The Council of Trent, Session VI, January 13, 1547 under Pope Paul III, "Decreed Concerning Justification," Chapter VII, In What the Justification of the Sinner Consists and What are its Causes, <https://www.ewtn.com/library/COUNCILS/TRENT6.HTM>.



Even worse, the ones who had the strongest habits were the most confident of their prediction. This is the dark side of vices, i.e., we tend to think we have more control of what we, in reality, have the least control over.<sup>53</sup>

The particular examen is the best way to discover just how deeply ingrained a sinful habit really is. Throughout the history of Christianity, spiritual writers have considered the daily examination of conscience to be of the utmost importance in the struggle to acquire virtues, uproot vices, and correct other defects.<sup>54</sup> Pope Pius XII said that we should not omit our “daily examination of conscience which is undoubtedly the most efficacious means we have for taking account of the conduct of our spiritual life during the day, [and] for removing the obstacles which hinder or retard one’s progress in virtue.”<sup>55</sup> “Taking account of the conduct of our spiritual life” is another way of saying, “the increasing of our self-knowledge of where we stand in relation to God.”<sup>56</sup>

The reason the particular examination of conscience is so effective is that it focuses a person’s attention and energies on the acquisition of a particular virtue and/or the elimination of a particular vice. This increases the will’s capacity to perform good acts in accord with the desired goal of becoming virtuous. In St. Francis de Sales’ book written specifically for people in the world, he recommends a daily examination of conscience beginning with thanking God and ending with the resolution to get to confession immediately and amend one’s life if one has sinned in thought, word or deed.<sup>56</sup>

The examination is at once both a “state of mind” and a daily operation. It is a state of mind inasmuch as it is a general disposition whereby one is always intensely interested in knowing, discerning, and perfecting one’s actions in the various circumstances of one’s life.<sup>57</sup> The examination is also an operation that “requires set times and precise rules for carrying it out.”<sup>58</sup>

The first thing one has to ascertain is the object of the particular examination called the predominant fault, which can be defined as “the defect in us that tends to prevail over the others.” It is the defect that most influences how we feel, judge and act.<sup>59</sup> There will be a strong inclination to a specific sinful act normally formed by the frequent repetition of the act itself. Each time we experience pleasure in some sinful action, there are physiological changes in the brain which effectively deepen the inclination to repeat that same action.<sup>60</sup><sup>61</sup> The predominant fault is the one that produces the most powerful impulses to sin even if one is not habitually falling into that sin. Usually, it is one of the seven capital sins, also called the seven deadly sins. They are pride, anger, lust, envy, gluttony, avarice, and sloth.

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<sup>53</sup> Ji, M. F. and W. Wood. “Purchase and Consumption Habits: Not Necessarily What You Intend.” *Journal of Consumer Psychology* 17, no. 4 (2007): 261. Cited in Dean, Jeremy. *Making Habits, Breaking Habits: Why We Do Things, Why We Don't, and How to Make Any Change Stick* (pp. 20-21). Da Capo Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>54</sup> Fr. Miguel Fuentes, *The Particular Examination of Conscience and the Dominant Defect*, (Chillum, MD: IVE Press, 2016), 11.

<sup>55</sup> Pius XII, *Menti Nostrae*, 52.

<sup>56</sup> St. Francis of Sales (2010-04-30). *Introduction to the Devout Life*, Part II, Chapter XI: Evening Prayer and Examination of Conscience (Kindle Locations 822-833). . Kindle Edition

<sup>57</sup> Casanovas, Ignacio, *Ejercicios Espirituales de san Ignacio de Loyola* (Balmes: Barcelona, 1945), 364.

<sup>58</sup> Casanovas, Ignacio, *Ejercicios Espirituales de san Ignacio de Loyola* (Balmes: Barcelona, 1945), 364.

<sup>59</sup> Garrigou-Lagrange O.P., Reverend Reginald. *The Three Ages of the Interior Life: Prelude of Eternal Life*, Chapter 22: The Predominant Fault (Kindle Locations 5458-5459). Catholic Way Publishing. Kindle Edition.

<sup>60</sup> Eric J. Nestler, “Transcriptional mechanisms of addiction: role of ΔFosB,” *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* 363/ 1507 (2008): 3245-3255, doi: 10.1098/rstb. 2008.0067.

<sup>61</sup> Eric J. Nestler, “Transcriptional mechanisms of addiction: role of ΔFosB,” *Phil. Trans. R. Soc. B* 363/ 1507 (2008): 3245-3255, doi: 10.1098/rstb. 2008.0067.

These capital sins are the source of other habitual sins or disorders<sup>62</sup>, which are called its daughters.<sup>63</sup> For example, if someone is prideful, they will also be prone to disobedience, boastfulness, hypocrisy, contention, obstinacy, discord, and be a lover of novelties.<sup>64</sup>

Or perhaps it is sloth. St. Thomas Aquinas defines sloth as “a sorrow for spiritual good” and “a sluggishness of the mind which neglects to begin [doing something] good”<sup>65</sup> One of the causes of sloth is when a man enjoys pleasures of the body more than the joyful pleasures of the spirit.<sup>66</sup> This is what is in play in many social media addictions. Many of our sins entail wasting time on things that keep us from doing what we should be doing (parenting, spiritual reading, studying, praying, working, etc.) For example, it is “now estimated that over 50% of time spent online is time spent procrastinating.”<sup>67</sup> That right, most of the time we are on internet, we have something more important that we should be doing, like spiritual things. *The Imitation of Christ* says that “Sometimes my sin is not what I do; it also describes what I don’t do when I know I should.”<sup>68</sup>

We need an enlightenment from God to see ourselves properly, i.e., as God sees us. Fr. Chad Ripperger says that, “Grace is the necessary thing to truly know what our predominant fault is.”<sup>69</sup> When we pray about an important decision, God gives us actual graces to enlighten the mind. When God communicates an idea, a suggestion or an inspiration to the soul, it is usually through the ministry of angles. Normally, we will have no idea of any angelic intervention. We are much more apt to notice diabolic influence in the form of bad images, etc. That is because the good angels guide us to act in accord with reason enlightened by faith so it seems perfectly natural.<sup>70</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas says that the angel exercises a hidden, but real influence on man’s faculties whereby he helps the person determine the prudent action to take.<sup>71</sup> Fr. John Hardon says that, “We can honestly say that we are never thinking alone. Our mind is always being influenced either by the spirits of evil whom God allows to try to seduce us into sin, or by the good spirits who are divine agents in leading us to God.”<sup>72</sup> When angles move you, you will just see clearly what God wills for you, what He wants you to do or avoid. I don’t know how many times that has happened to me in prayer before the Holy Eucharist. Sometimes, it is something like, “What was I thinking? God clearly doesn’t will that for me.” That’s why I spend a lot of time writing homilies and conferences in our chapel, in the presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament. I get divine enlightenment there. In fact, perhaps the greatest preacher of all time, Bishop Fulton Sheen wrote everything in the presence of the Most Blessed Sacrament. He was a great preacher because God spoke through him. He depended on God to help him.

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<sup>62</sup> Fr. Miguel Fuentes, *The Particular Examination of Conscience and the Dominant Defect*, (Chillum, MD: IVE Press, 2016), 21-22.

<sup>63</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 132, a. 5.

<sup>64</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 132, a. 5.

<sup>65</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 35, a. 1.

<sup>66</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, q. 35, a. 1, ad 2.Fsco

<sup>67</sup> Salzgeber, Nils. *Stop Procrastinating: A Simple Guide to Hacking Laziness, Building Self Discipline, and Overcoming Procrastination* (p. 62). Self-Published. Kindle Edition.

<sup>68</sup> Kempis, Thomas a. *The Imitation of Christ: The Beatitudes Edition* (p. 80). Barrington Publications. Kindle Edition.

<sup>69</sup> Fr. Chad Ripperger, Conference on Self-Knowledge, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hxzRmjHSGIA>

<sup>70</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book 3, Chapter 92.

<sup>71</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, q. 113, a. 1, ad 2.

<sup>72</sup> Fr. John Hardon, *We All Have Our Own Special Guardian Angel*, [http://www.therealpresence.org/archives/Angelology/Angelology\\_019.htm](http://www.therealpresence.org/archives/Angelology/Angelology_019.htm).

The examen of conscience is primarily a mindset. I will not fall into this or that sinful activity. St. Ignatius writes that we should end the night with a prayer to amend one's life with the help of God's grace.<sup>73</sup> I recommend repeating the prayer when you get up in the morning. Second, twice daily, perhaps at noon and before you go to bed, examine your conscience to see if you committed a fault. St. Ignatius of Loyola (#27) also recommends an eternal sign be given upon recognizing that one has failed in their resolution (e.g., gently beating one's breast).

Saint Ignatius of Loyola took "so much care of his conscience that each day he compared week with week, month with month, day with day, seeking daily to advance"<sup>74</sup> on the road to sanctity. St. Basil, the Father of Eastern Monasticism said that, "You will certainly grow in virtue if you make a daily account of your actions and compare them with the previous day."<sup>75</sup>

A vice is just a bad habit. In this sense, habit experts note that vices are dangerous because "your actions come under the direction of your automatic and nonconscious mind. You fall into old patterns before you realize what's happening."<sup>76</sup> Whatever we are unaware of, we cannot choose. A conscious decision to track our falls throughout the day helps us become aware of how often we fall. Roy Baumeister and John Tierney, in their book *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength*, suggest that awareness—both self-awareness and awareness of others seeing us—is related to self-control. Daily monitoring of progress (or lack of progress), they say, is key to growth.<sup>77</sup>

One of the reasons this works is that it helps you see the progress or lack thereof that you are making. In a book entitled, *Atomic Habits*, James Clear says that:

Habit tracking naturally builds a series of visual cues like the streak of X's on your calendar or the list of meals in your food log. When you look at the calendar and see your streak, you'll be reminded to act again. Research has shown that people who track their progress on goals like losing weight, quitting smoking, and lowering blood pressure are all more likely to improve than those who don't. One study of more than sixteen hundred people found that those who kept a daily log lost twice as much weight as those who did not.

Measurement offers one way to overcome our blindness to our behavior and notice what's really going on each day.<sup>78</sup>

[He says that] The most effective form of motivation is progress. When we get a signal that we are moving forward, we become more motivated to continue down that path. In this way, habit tacking can have an addictive effect on motivation. Each small win feeds your desire.<sup>79</sup>

**This is why wearing a Fitbit or tracking what you eat helps you exercise more and eat healthier. We should track our progress on a daily and weekly basis. The main cause of perpetual vices is when we fall multiple times before we get to confession or renew our**

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<sup>73</sup> Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius, #43. Ignatius says "proponer enmienda con su gracia."

<sup>74</sup> Quoted in Joseph de Guibert, *The Jesuits: Their Spiritual Doctrine and Practice. A Historical Study* (St. Louis: Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1986), 39-40.

<sup>75</sup> St. Basil, "Sermo de Renuntiatione Saeculi." PL 3, 647. Quoted in Fr. John Hardon, *All My Liberty*, Chapter 9: On Examining One's Conscience, [http://www.therealpresence.org/archives/Christian\\_Spirituality/Christian\\_Spirituality\\_027.htm](http://www.therealpresence.org/archives/Christian_Spirituality/Christian_Spirituality_027.htm)

<sup>76</sup> Clear, James. *Atomic Habits* (p. 85). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>77</sup> Roy Baumeister and John Tierney, *Willpower: Rediscovering the Greatest Human Strength* (New York: Penguin Books, 2001), 114.

<sup>78</sup> Clear, James. *Atomic Habits* (p. 197). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>79</sup> Clear, James. *Atomic Habits* (p. 198). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

resolution. Bad habits are associated with triggers, which, in turn, cause a physiological impulse in the brain. The only way to lessen the intensity of the impulse is by lessening the number of falls. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that grace strengthens the will, but the ability to perform a virtuous habit easily come from practicing the virtue.<sup>80</sup>

Moreover, through the examination I can foresee what activities I can substitute for the ones that usually lead me to sin. I may have found that when I bring my phone to bed, I usually end up looking at pornographic images or wasting time watching frivolous videos. Instead, I leave my phone in another room and pray a decade of the rosary. This is practical self-knowledge.

With regard to planning your day, spiritual writers have always recommended a rule of life. You should have a daily schedule that emphasizes your duties of state and your spiritual life. Hence, you should strive to get up at the same time each morning, pray your rosary at the same time, go to Mass, work, etc., on a schedule. Of course, there has to be lots of flexibility. Adolphe Tanqueray in his classic work *The Spiritual Life* says a rule of life helps one not waste time. Even if the schedule is not mathematically detailed, it gives set times and principles to govern one's actions with regard to religious exercises, work, family, and recreation. Little is unforeseen because you have these alternative plans. If there are exceptional circumstances, when they are over, you immediately go back to the rule. Having an intention to practice some virtue at a predetermined time aids one in forming good habits that help one grow closer to God.<sup>81</sup>

Today, secular authors concur. Experts on forming habits say we need to incorporate into our daily schedule specific types of plans called "implementation intentions." This works most effectively when there is a strong link between a specific situation and an action. For those struggling with pornography, it might be "I will never use internet alone unless it has an internet filter." For those struggling with gluttony, "I will stop eating after 7 pm every day" or "I will never eat sweets." Studies show that people who make a specific plan for when and where they will perform a new habit are more likely to follow through.<sup>82</sup> In one meta-analysis, 94 studies with over 8,000 participants were examined on the effect of implementation intentions on people trying to develop new habits like exercising more and eating healthier, etc. The effect size for implementation intentions was medium to large.<sup>83</sup> This is psychologists' shoptalk indicating that implementation intentions are very effective.

Numerous secular studies confirm that if you develop one good habit, it strengthens other pre-existing habits. So if you start exercising or studying more, you are more likely to eat healthier food, watch less television, drink less alcohol, etc.<sup>84</sup> Dr. Todd Heatherton says that willpower functions like a muscle, even though it isn't; the more you exercise it, the more control you will have in all areas of your life. It seems to correspond to changes in the

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<sup>80</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 65, a. 3, ad 2; See also Aquinas, *De veritate*, q. 17, a. 1, ad s. c. 4.

<sup>81</sup> Tanqueray, Adolphe. *The Spiritual Life: A Treatise on Ascetical and Mystical Theology*, 560 b, TAN Books. Kindle Edition.

<sup>82</sup> Edwin Locke and Gary Latham, "Building a Practically Useful Theory of Goal Setting and Task Motivation: A 35-Year Odyssey," *American Psychologist* 57, no. 9 (2002): 705-717, doi:10.1037/e513702014-058. Quoted in Clear, James. *Atomic Habits* (p. 71). Penguin Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

<sup>83</sup> Gollwitzer, P. M., and P. Sheeran. "Implementation Intentions and Goal Achievement: A Meta-Analysis of Effects and Processes." *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* 38 (2006): 69-119. Quoted in Dean, Jeremy. *Making Habits, Breaking Habits: Why We Do Things, Why We Don't, and How to Make Any Change Stick* (p. 139). Da Capo Press. Kindle Edition.

<sup>84</sup> Charles Duhigg, *The Power of Habit: Why We Do What We Do in Life and Business* (New York: Random House, 2014), 138-141.

prefrontal cortex region of the brain, the region responsible for controlling behavior.<sup>85</sup> This dovetails nicely with Catholic theology. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that if you grow in one virtue, you grow in the other virtues as well. He says that, “all the virtues grow in proportion to each other.”<sup>86</sup> This is important since if you have any inclination to sin, even venial sin, you will need to spend time in Purgatory. Moreover, how virtuous you are when you die determines your degree of beatitude or happiness for all eternity. And that’s why it is foolish not to battle against sin, not to make a concentrated effort to eliminate vice and become virtuous.

Socrates, the great Greek philosopher said, “that the unexamined life is not worth living.”<sup>87</sup> We should try to figure out what our purpose in life is and then live according to that purpose. In this life, we are forming our eternal state of being. So we should constantly monitor what we have become to date in relation to forming good or evils habits. Our manner of life for the next zillion years will depend on how well we have done just that.

To be added: In this respect, De Montfort tells us that “Mary will share her faith with you.”<sup>88</sup>

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39. <sup>85</sup> Todd F. Heatherton and Dylan D. Wagner, “Cognitive Neuroscience of Self-Regulation Failure,” *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 15 (2011): 132–

<sup>86</sup> St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 66, a. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 38a, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=plat.+apol.+38a>.

<sup>88</sup> De Montfort, *True Devotion*, 109.