

7. The Examination of Conscience

When he came to himself he said... 'I will get up and go to my father.'

(Lk 15:17-18)

696 In the evening before retiring to sleep, we perform a prayer practice called the examination of conscience. It consists in reviewing the day that has passed in the light of God's commandments. The purpose is to see in the day that has passed the signs of God's care and providence as well the expressions of our sinfulness and weakness. To contemplate the events of the day through God's eyes is an occasion to see them in truth—as they really are. This perspective will allow us to transfer the events of the passing day from our memory to our conscience and to evaluate them by God's measure.

697 The great blessing of a prayerful examination of conscience is self-knowledge. We start paying attention to what we are doing, saying and thinking. We observe within ourselves things that we would never notice without this prayer. At the same time, we become aware of our deficiencies without self-justification. While trusting in God's mercy, Saint Basil the Great teaches:

When the day's work is ended, thanksgiving should be offered for what has been granted us, or for what we have done rightly therein, and confession made of our omissions voluntary or involuntary, or of a secret fault, if we chance to have committed any in words or deeds, or in the heart itself For by prayer we propitiate God for all our misdemeanours. The examination of our past actions is a great help toward not falling into like faults again.⁴⁵⁹

698 A fruit of a prayerful examination of conscience is the grace to forgive "those who trespass against us," and to find inner peace. An important part of the examination of conscience is perceiving God's plan for us within the events of the passing day. When we recognize God's action in the day's events and the people we have met, we become capable of accepting all that happened with gratitude and sense God's nearness in what we experienced. To conclude our examination of conscience before falling asleep, we may say with the psalmist: "I lie down and sleep; I awake again, for the Lord sustains me" (Ps 3:5).

⁴⁵⁹ BASIL THE GREAT, *The Longer Rules*, 37, 4: PG 31, 1009.

E. The Place and Time of Prayer

1. Entering into Solitude for Prayer

Whenever you pray, go into your room.

(Mt 6:6)

699 In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ taught us that during prayer we should "go into our room and shut the door." The Fathers of the spiritual life frequently offered interpretations of these words. They understood them as an injunction to direct our attention deep within ourselves. This is the interior attention to which Saint Basil the Great refers in his appeal to "Attend to yourself!" The liturgical "Let us be attentive!" continually reminds us of this. The most important reaction to this call is to increase our attention to what is going on within ourselves.

2. How Often Should We Pray?

Pray without ceasing.

(1 Thes 5:17)

700 The Church guides us on our path of prayer and proposes that we rely on her accumulated experience of prayer. This experience indicates that we need to set aside designated times to speak with God. As a minimum this would be twice a day—in the morning and in the evening. Appropriate prayers for the morning and evening are found in every prayerbook along with other prayers that accompany the believer through the various situations he or she encounters during the day. Prayer is our main rule of life. As we pray more often, we progressively bring prayer closer to our daily affairs until prayer becomes one of our main daily activities and all other endeavours are filled with the spirit of prayer. This is why prayer and work are two mutually dependent aspects of the Christian way of life. If filled with communion with God, the Christian's life is transformed into a feast, and it becomes a time for our sanctification and the world's transfiguration.