

FROM THE ARCHBISHOP

Examining conscience helpful for course corrections

On a rural highway in north-central Arkansas, there is an abandoned building, ramshackle and weed-covered after years of neglect, which once housed a local business. Driving down the highway, one cannot help but notice the building, because painted on its roof is the name of its former occupant: "Risky's Security Storage."

I'm sure Risky was a fine person, and I hope the closing of his business did not cause him financial ruin, but I could not help but smile at the name. I'm just not sure I would want to leave my valuables at a place called "Risky's."

The incongruity of the name was so obvious that it immediately caught my attention. But it also got me to thinking about ironies — even contradictions — in my own life which may be subtle but are equally telling.

Are there areas in which I say one thing but unwittingly do another? Do I tell myself that my intentions and goals are set solidly in one direction but put them in jeopardy by following another, risky path? Do I leave some habits completely unexamined and idly allow myself to be lulled in a direction opposite my deepest aspirations, dragged down by the feet even as I climb the Lord's mountain?

Missing the mark

Hypocrisy can be glaring and deliberate, a kind of posturing and pretending intended to advance ourselves or appear better than we are. But it can also be subtle, unwitting and unintended, unclear to us but obvious to



ARCHBISHOP
J. PETER
SARTAIN

others.

Witting or unwitting, such inconsistencies deserve our attention. Left unexamined, they can eventually lead us off course, far from our goals and opposed to our greatest needs.

In "Together on the Road: A Vision of Lived Communion for the Church and the

Priesthood," Father Massimo Camisasca writes: "Anyone who knows how to man a sailboat on high seas knows how important the tiniest of corrections can be when the winds and currents multiply effects to infinity. Life is like this, too: a small correction can have infinite repercussions on our existence."

It is not that every fault is equally serious, every sin equally weighty, or every correction equally urgent. Moreover, we need not be anxious that habitual venial sins will cause our eternal damnation. But it is quite possible that out of neglect, ignorance or laziness we altogether ignore the need to work on minor faults, assuming that because they are minor they are of no consequence.

Humor, humility

As Camisasca indicates, small course corrections can make a big dif-

ference.

It is interesting to note that the literal meaning of the Greek word for sin is "to miss the mark" — to fail to attain the goal. Life is full of course corrections, and only with God's grace do we notice and admit the need and then follow through with corrective action. Conversion is a lifelong project.

The Catholic tradition of examining one's conscience is very helpful in this regard. Prayerfully examining our behavior in light of the Ten Commandments, the Gospels, the beatitudes, church teaching and the golden rule, we receive insight into the incongruities, inconsistencies, contradictions — and riskiness — of the patterns into which we have settled.

A good examination of conscience requires seriousness and humor, honesty and humility. On the one hand, we learn to laugh at our frailty and not take ourselves too seriously — "Lord, there I go again!" On the other hand, we learn to admit in humility that something needs to be done — "Lord, help me not go there again!" Most of all, we learn how much we need God's help and how eager he is to provide it.

DO YOU HAVE AN INTENTION FOR ARCHBISHOP SARTAIN'S PRAYER LIST?

You may send it to him at Archbishop Sartain's Prayer List, Archdiocese of Seattle, 710 Ninth Ave., Seattle, WA 98104.

Nourish your heart

Years ago I found a simple bit of wisdom (and a helpful tool for examining my conscience) in a saying of one of the Desert Fathers (solitary monks and nuns of the fourth and fifth centuries). Abba Poeman, "the Shepherd," once said:

"Do not give your heart to that which does not satisfy your heart."

I can fritter away my time, my energy, my attention, my money, my affections — my heart — by feeding myself things which are not good for me. A big, gooey cinnamon roll may taste delicious with the morning coffee, but it cannot supply the nutrients I need to meet the tasks of the morning.

In the same way, it is possible to "feed" myself with all manner of entertainment, conversation and preoccupation, none of which can nourish me — and much of which can ultimately harm me.

The flip side of Abba Poeman's advice is equally helpful: Give your heart to that which satisfies your heart.

God, faith, family, sacred Scripture, the Eucharist and other sacraments, prayer, good reading, humility, love, mercy, contrition, generosity, sacrifice, truth — these are the things that truly nourish our hearts, help us correct

our course, resolve every incongruity and inconsistency, keep us from putting ourselves at risk and set us solidly on course, straight as an arrow toward fulfillment in God.

"Do not give your heart to that which does not satisfy your heart."

ABBA POEMAN