



NAVIGATING THE INTERIOR LIFE

ROOT SIN WORKBOOK



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THE SECRET OF THE FIAT

UNCOVERING OUR ROOT SIN AND SAYING "YES" TO GOD

My Root Sin – What is it?

What is my root sin? If you are new to the process of spiritual direction or spiritual formation this question might strike a strange chord with you. What is "root sin" after all, and why does it matter? In older writings on the spiritual life you might come across this idea of root sin called "ruling passion" "predominant fault" "dominant defect" or "dominant passion." Regardless of what we call it, if you understand the phrase, "getting to the root of the problem," then you have the basic idea.

Depending upon which spiritual tradition we draw from, there are many ways to classify, categorize, and understand root sins. The Catechism of the Catholic Church provides an overview of the definition and classification of sins beginning in section 1846. For our purposes we will keep this as simple as possible and provide three basic categories of root sin; pride, vanity, and sensuality that are rooted in a traditional exposition of 1 John 2:16.

"For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world."*

Root Sins and Their Manifestations

The following is a list of three root sins and some of their most common manifestations. We have also included several warm up questions to get you thinking in the right direction. It is important as you begin this process that you handle it with a great deal of prayer and simplicity. First, just as with the previous exercises, be sure that you are in a quiet place (most preferably with Christ in adoration). Second, pray and ask the Holy Spirit to give you insight and wisdom and ensure that you sit in



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silence before the Lord for a few moments before you begin. Be careful not to get caught up in the wording of the questions or examples and to avoid any tendency to split hairs. If you don't understand a particular statement or question, just move on. Also take caution to avoid any concern over the less than perfect distinction between root sins. The human heart rarely works in perfectly clear distinctions of vice and virtue. The goal in this exercise is to be *approximately* right versus *precisely* wrong.

Because of our fallen human nature, all three root sins are present in all of us, but one usually predominates – identifying that one is the goal of this exercise.

Instructions

Prayerfully and slowly review your warm-up questions. Write down your brief reflections on each. Then, begin your review of the root sin manifestations. If you have seen any of the manifestations in yourself, simply check them upon your first pass through. Complete your first pass quickly. Check the manifestations even if they ring true only in the slightest sense. Then, once you have completed your first pass, stop and pray again. Sit in silence again for a time. Pray and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you. Then take a second turn back through the warm-up questions and the checklist. This time work more slowly through the checklist and put a star next to those symptoms that most *frequently* appear in your life. You should begin to notice more stars or checkmarks appearing in one of the three root sin categories. This is the place to begin your next battle against sin in your life. Be encouraged, the Holy Spirit through this exercise, is leading you into a new phase of progress and growth.

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BEGIN YOUR EXERCISE WITH ONE OF THESE PRAYERS

"Lord, help me to see the obstacles in me that get in the way of my growth in love and service to you and others. Help me to see the things that I have chosen that keep me from you. Help me to see the things that I may have not deliberately chosen that keep me from you. Help me to be honest with myself and see clearly where you desire to set me free and then help me to be courageous and ruthless in rooting out the darkness and allowing your light to heal me and draw me firmly onto the path of life."

"Oh blessed Trinity, help me to know my deeds and myself without deception or duplicity. Save me dear God from falsehood and pretension, not only in the eyes of others but also in the depths of my soul. I am weak and faulty. Make me grow strong, holy, and honest with pure intention. I ask with grace to know the clarity of how I have sinned, how I have failed you and others. Most particularly I beg to know the roots and reasons and sources of my sins to begin to see myself as I really am. To acknowledge the deep flaws and weakness of character that lie under the surface of my behavior. What kind of person am I? Oh God, tell me, tell me unsparingly. I wish to listen to you with all humility. Help me to be led by you to live a better and more holy life. Lord help me also to be completely sorry once again for all the ugly, hateful, and unspeakable past evil of my life. You and I know what that wretched evil has been. Make me sorrier for it than I have ever been before. Come, O Holy Spirit, fill my mind with light and my heart with honesty. Immaculate mother of Christ and honest St Joseph please pray for me and help me. Amen"



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ROOT SIN EVALUATION WARM-UP QUESTIONS¹

1. To what do my thoughts naturally tend? What are the preoccupations of my heart? What keeps me up at night? Where do my thoughts and desires spontaneously take me when I am alone or without distractions?
2. What is generally the cause or source of my sadness, my anxiety, my frustration, my lack of peace, my joy, or my pleasure?
3. When I have knowingly sinned or disobeyed God, what was the sin or what was my motivation to sin? What are the patterns of sins that show up regularly in confession? Is there a sin or an issue that I regularly bring up in confession?
4. If and when I have resisted or avoided God in any way, how have I done so? What was at the bottom of my motivation? Why did I do it? What temporal benefit did I gain from the resistance or avoidance?

¹ Adapted from Father Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange's, *The Three Ages of the Interior Life*, 1989, Rockford, Tan, Pages 316-318

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ROOT SIN OF PRIDE

Pride: Excessive love of one's own excellence or desired excellence. Pride manifests itself when we seek our self-worth and security in our own abilities, traits, or strengths (real or perceived).

Never	Sometimes	Frequently	Focus
			Manifestations of the Root Sin of Pride <i>1st Review: Move quickly and assess by instinct. If you hesitate, go with your first instinct.</i> <i>2nd Review: Review those checked in "Sometimes" or "Frequently" categories. Determine manifestations that require attention and identify them in the "Focus" column with a checkmark.</i>
☐	☐	☐	too high an opinion of myself or an elevated concept of myself
☐	☐	☐	annoyance with those who contradict me or question what I say
☐	☐	☐	inability to submit to those who I judge as less competent or less spiritual than me
☐	☐	☐	refusing or resisting assent to others without a satisfactory explanation
☐	☐	☐	anger if I don't get my way or am not taken into account
☐	☐	☐	easily judgmental, putting others down, gossiping about them
☐	☐	☐	slow to recognize or acknowledge my own mistakes or weaknesses
☐	☐	☐	slow to see when I hurt others and an inability to seek and give forgiveness
☐	☐	☐	frustration or anger when others don't thank me for favors or work that I do
☐	☐	☐	unwillingness to serve, rebellion against what I don't like or agree with



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			impatience, distance, brusqueness in my daily contact with others
			thinking I am the only one who knows how to do things right
			unwillingness to let others help or advise me
			inflated idea of my own intelligence and understanding
			dismissing what I do not understand or what others see differently
			not feeling a need for God, even though I do say prayers
			nursing grudges, even in small matters
			never taking orders or bristling when orders are given to me
			inflexible in preferences or perspective
			always putting myself and my things first
			indifference towards others and their needs, never putting myself out for them
			centering everything (conversation, choices, recreation..) on myself and my likes
			calculating in my relations with God and with others

Notes:

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Root Sin of Vanity

Vanity: Excessive concern for and seeking our security in how we are perceived (what others think about us).

Never	Sometimes	Frequently	Focus	Manifestations of the Root Sin of Vanity <i>1st Review: Move quickly and assess by instinct. If you hesitate, go with your first instinct.</i> <i>2nd Review: Review those checked in "Sometimes" or "Frequently" categories. Determine manifestations that require attention and identify them in the "Focus" column with a check mark.</i>
☐	☐	☐	☐	always seeking admiration and praise, worrying about not getting it
☐	☐	☐	☐	excessive concern about physical appearance
☐	☐	☐	☐	saying "yes" to too many things in order to be approved by others
☐	☐	☐	☐	dedicating excessive time to "primping" one's person or possessions
☐	☐	☐	☐	hoping "I am the best" and finding ways to get others to think so
☐	☐	☐	☐	being guided by the opinions of others rather than principle
☐	☐	☐	☐	some types of shyness out of fear of not being liked/accepted by others
☐	☐	☐	☐	sacrificing principles in order to fit in
☐	☐	☐	☐	placing too high a premium on popularity and acceptance
☐	☐	☐	☐	easily discouraged at my failures
☐	☐	☐	☐	abandonment of principles in order to "fit in"



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			shifting blame when we are struggling to achieve our goals
			hypocrisy or two-facedness in order to be accepted
			taking pleasure in listening to gossip
			taking pleasure in hearing about or speaking about others' failures or misfortune
			breaking confidences
			stretching the truth or outright lying to be admired or to hide shortcomings
			downplaying the accomplishments of others while lifting up your own
			anger when our position , role or authority is not sufficiently honored
			taking credit for the successes of others
			severe disappointment when others don't appreciate my ideas or possessions
			always wanting to be the center of attention, at times stretching the truth, or lying outright, or being uncharitable in my words in order to achieve this

Notes:

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Root Sin of Sensuality:

Sensuality: Seeking our security and self-worth in possessions, comfort, or the avoidance of discomfort.

Never	Sometimes	Frequently	Focus	Manifestations of the Root Sin of Sensuality <i>1st Review: Move quickly and assess by instinct. If you hesitate, go with your first instinct.</i> <i>2nd Review: Review those checked in "Sometimes" or "Frequently" categories. Determine manifestations that require attention and identify them in the "Focus" column with a check mark.</i>
☐	☐	☐	☐	laziness
☐	☐	☐	☐	excessive busy-ness with things we like to do rather than what must be done
☐	☐	☐	☐	avoidance of spiritual disciplines for the sake of things that are easier to do
☐	☐	☐	☐	always seeking the most comfortable, what requires the least effort
☐	☐	☐	☐	not going the extra mile for others
☐	☐	☐	☐	procrastination, last-minute in everything
☐	☐	☐	☐	shoddiness, complaining, excessively affected by minor discomforts
☐	☐	☐	☐	inability or unwillingness to sacrifice
☐	☐	☐	☐	not doing my part at home
☐	☐	☐	☐	always expecting everyone else to serve me



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			behavior and decisions ruled by my feelings and moods instead of my principles
			daydreaming a lot with self at center
			unable to control my thoughts when they attract me, even if they are not good
			doing or partaking only what I enjoy (choice of food, drink, work, etc)
			allowing what I enjoy or prefer to push out what I should do (duty to God/others)
			uncontrolled curiosity, wanting to see/experience everything and every pleasure
			senses and impulses overrule what I know is right and wrong
			acting out feelings (frustrations, desires...) with no regard for God or others
			only working with those I like, being easily hurt
			fickleness and inconstancy
			unable to stay on track without constant supervision
			can never finish what I start

Notes:



Beyond Sin to Virtue and Holiness

You must give up your old way of life; you must put aside your old self, which gets corrupted by following illusory desires. Your mind must be renewed by a spiritual revolution so that you can put on the new self that has been created in God's way, in the goodness and holiness of the truth. (Ephesians 4:22-24, NJB).

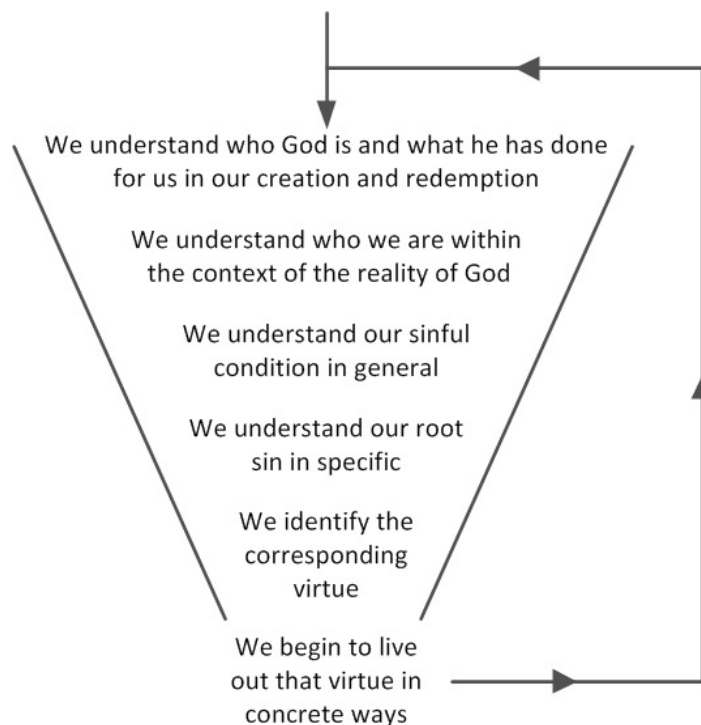
As with this passage from St Paul in Ephesians, the New Testament is replete with examples of this same type of exhortation. The basic pattern can be simplified this way, turn *from* sin (whatever that sin may be), and turn to virtue (whatever that virtue may be). You have identified your root sin; now it is time to identify the opposite virtue. If we purposefully, clearly and specifically identify the opposite virtue, the *narrow path* of complete repentance becomes obvious and practical. This narrow path is the same path that Jesus alluded to when He said in Matthew chapter seven:

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide and the way is easy, that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard, that leads to life, and those who find it are few. (Matthew 7:13 RSV).

If this is still feeling a bit vague, the following diagram and description of the process may be helpful.



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First, as we pursue God and the Church, the sacraments, prayer, scripture, study, and spiritual reading, we begin to understand him better. We discover how much He loves us and we discover what he's done specifically for us as individuals. We find help in the context of our need and struggles of day-to-day life. This awareness then, naturally leads to a shift in our understanding of who we are. Our identity then begins, at least in our own awareness, to take shape within the context of who God is and how He is working, loving, living and breathing within us. I say "in our own awareness" not because this is a reality that we manufacture but it is a reality that we begin to see and understand in a tangible and personal way. As we move deeper into this relationship, by the work of the Holy Spirit, we begin to see how it is that we are succeeding and struggling in our efforts to deepen that relationship. We understand what pleases him. We understand those things within us that hinder or damage our friendship and intimacy with him.

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At some point those who are working diligently on their spiritual lives begin to see patterns of sin and patterns of virtue. They begin to recognize what God is asking of them (frequently, this is when the faithful pilgrim seeks out spiritual direction) and rejoice in what God is doing in and through them!

So, as illustrated above, we identify our root sin and then identify the corresponding virtue that we desire to cultivate and use to push our root sin out of our lives. We then work to concretize our pursuit of virtue on a week to week, day to day, and hour to hour basis. Finally, the process begins all over again, until we see him face-to-face and hear, "Well done good servant!" (Luke 19:17 RSV)

To specifically tie our discussion back to Jesus' reference to the narrow path, this diagram, this process, this life rhythm, is the narrow path. Even more specifically, the path of virtue and practicing virtue in the context of grace and a vibrant relationship with Christ, is the narrow path that leads to life, joy, and peace in Christ. In St John's Gospel, chapter ten verse ten, Jesus said, "The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" (RSV). Living a life of virtue and grace with and in Christ is an abundant life!

Identifying Corresponding Virtue

It is important to note here that we are seeking to live a *positive* life of virtue; *not* one focused on sin or our failures. Though beginners in the spiritual life will often be required to focus on the elimination of sin, the process as a whole should be a positive, active, living path, not a negative one. Said another way, facing and overcoming sin is like coming to a fork in the road of our spiritual lives. We are confronted with the choice regarding a particular sin and we choose to either stay on the narrow path or take the path of destruction, away from God. Assuming the course we've chosen is toward God, once we have identified and confessed our sins, that fork in the road is then behind us as we pursue God and holiness down the narrow path of virtue. We live a life-orientation that readily recognizes that a



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particular sin or imperfection is behind us and God is with us and before us. Jesus' admonition in Luke chapter nine verse sixty-two is apropos:

"No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God." (RSV)

St Paul echoed this same thought when he said in Philippians chapter three verse thirteen and fourteen:

"...forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

It is critical therefore to focus the vast majority of our energy on the forward pursuit of virtue, not on the sins, sinful inclinations, or attachments of the present or the past. Our sin can and will provide the sign posts on our path that help us identify the battles we are called to fight on the narrow way leading to God. Yet it should never be the primary focus of our energy.

For example, a hypothetical directee shares that she struggles with a specific manifestation of vanity. She enjoys the trophies, awards and praise related to her accomplishments so much that she would constantly seek to draw a great deal of attention to her achievements. In this case her director helped her to identify that the proper path of virtue was to focus specifically on helping others to succeed, avoid any effort to take credit, and ensure that she gave proper accolades to others in the process. She also determined that she should solve problems and serve others without in any way revealing that she had done so, and rather than letting her friends know what charities she had given to, she determined that she should make quiet anonymous donations and contributions.

So let's break this down, the way she and her spiritual director would in her specific plan to deal with this hindrance to her spiritual growth:

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Root Sin: *Vanity*

Manifestation: When I accomplish anything good, I am always looking around for praise. Sometimes I fail to acknowledge the contribution of others in my work. At times I have gone so far as to stretch the truth regarding my real accomplishments.

Opposite Virtue(s): *Modesty and Humility*

Plan of Action Toward God:

- I will meditate on and memorize a passage of scripture on the humility of Christ as expressed in Philippians Chapter 2.
- I will pray the humility prayer every day in the morning for at least the next thirty days.
- I will examine my conscience at the end of each day and write down my failures and successes in following this plan. I will thank and praise him for my successes and ask forgiveness for my failures.
- I will review my daily notes with my spiritual director at the end of each week.
- I will go to confession if I stray too far off this path.

Plan of Action Toward Others:

- I will do at least one work of charity each day and specifically avoid telling anyone under any circumstance. I will not even hint at the good I have done.



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- If my good works are noticed, I will say, “Only by His grace” and purposefully change the subject to cast light on something good accomplished by someone else.

A few observations are in order. First, we need to be as specific as we can in our commitments to pursue virtue and avoid sin. Without this specificity, it is very difficult to determine if we are successful or not at the end of each day. To the degree we are specific, we will be accountable; to the degree we are accountable, we will be humble and dependent; to the degree we are humble and dependent, we will receive the grace we need to overcome sin and exercise virtue. Second, there are no cookie-cutter formulas available for this soul saving work. Our souls are more unique and different from one another than are our faces. Every battle, though it has similarities to those experienced by others, is unique to us as individuals. Each person needs to outline a plan that is customized to their situation under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and a holy spiritual director.

A Simple Guide to Virtue

Selecting the opposite virtue need not be a complicated activity. There is no need to search and find the specific or exact opposite. What we are looking for are the behaviors we can choose that will replace the sins we have rejected. The governing principal of this selection is to be approximately right, not precisely wrong. To help you, here is a table with some ideas regarding corresponding virtues.

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Pride	Humility, Simplicity, Meekness, Compassion, Patience, Docility, Service of Others, Dependence on God
Vanity	Purity of Intention, Seeing Good in Others, True Acceptance of Self, Silence Regarding Faults of Others
Sensuality	Self Discipline, Constancy, Tenacity, Self Denial, Hope, Timeliness, Proactive, Balanced

As you can see, these virtues are simply the opposites of some of the manifestations listed for each of the root sins.

Living Virtue on a Day-To-Day Basis

As we observed, one of the secrets to success in this area lies in getting as specific as is possible. If you struggle achieving a practical specificity ask yourself a few key questions:

If I were to explain my root sin to someone who didn't know me very well, how would I do it? Now, after you think about this for a moment, stop and write down your explanation in the context of the categories below. What is my root sin? How does it specifically manifest itself in my daily life?

- Toward God?
- Toward Myself?
- Toward Others?



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Then, do the same for the corresponding virtue.

If I were to explain my desire to live out a particular virtue in a specific way, how would I do it? Now, after you think about this for a moment, stop and write down your explanation.

What is the virtue I desire to live out? How might it specifically manifest itself in my daily life? When my day is done, how will I know if I have specifically and tangibly lived out this virtue? At the end of the day, what questions can I ask myself to determine if I have lived out my commitment?

- Toward God?
- Toward Myself?
- Toward Others?

The answer to these questions will now serve as a general examination of conscience that you can use on a periodic basis to evaluate your progress and review the outcomes with God and your spiritual director.

Obviously there are thousands of combinations of manifestations of sin and their corresponding virtues. These are just a few examples. If you get stuck, the best way to get creative insight on sin and virtue is through part three of the Catechism of the Catholic Church entitled *Life in Christ* and in particular articles seven and eight.

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