

ON SCRUPULOSITY

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AN OVERVIEW

“If we turn away from evil out of fear of punishment, we are in the position of slaves. If we pursue the enticement of wages ... we resemble mercenaries. Finally, if we obey for the sake of the good itself and out of love for Him who commands ... we are in the position of children.” St. Basil the Great¹

Scrupulosity is an emotional condition, an ultra sensitivity to sin, which produces excessive anxiety and fear from the thought of eternal damnation. There are two types of scrupulosity:

1. Developmental: this refers to a short phase in a person’s life. Youth often experience this type of anxiety if they become serious about their faith. Adults can experience it after a conversion, or as they begin to reflect seriously on the purpose of life. Those who experience this type of scrupulosity will find that it is temporary and usually disappears as they avail themselves of the ordinary means of sanctification.
2. Emotional: this refers to an enduring condition. Those who suffer from it will find that they experience, alternately, periods of intense anxiety and periods of mild affliction. It can last for years, sometimes a lifetime.

The purpose of these reflections is to address emotional scrupulosity and the means by which it may be healed.

This condition is a religious, moral and psychological state of anxiety, fear and indecision. It is coupled with extreme guilt, depression and fear of punishment from God. However, each person who suffers from it does so uniquely. There is no mold or pattern into which every scrupulous person fits. For example, one man might have a great desire to be pure and chaste but develop scruples concerning sexual thoughts. His soul’s strong point becomes a breeding ground for scruples. Another person might be horrified at his lack of charity and develop scruples over the slightest interaction with others.

Most people who suffer from this condition have only one image of God, that of an exacting master. In consequence, they think that in order to be loved by God and saved from damnation they must become a perfect slave. In order to maintain this perfect master/slave relationship the person attempts to eliminate certain *spheres* of sin from his life; not just sin, but everything surrounding sin. In order to avoid sin, he attempts to control any thoughts which might possibly lead to sin, usually by means of rigid formulas and absolute maxims. Coupled with his desire to control his thoughts is his fear of discovering anything about sins with which he is not familiar, as this knowledge might lead to ‘contamination’ and the introduction to new sins. He tries to stay vigilant, in a white-knuckled sort of way, but experiences great anxiety – sometimes agonizing anxiety – if an improper thought will not depart from him. When this happens, he usually apologizes to God profusely and begins to perform a ritual of prayer or penance, becoming a kind of moral hypochondriac.

¹*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1828

Although he believes the Sacred Scriptures to be the word of God, the scrupulous person tends to focus on certain aspects of a verse, twisting its meaning to suit his condition. Whatever is received is received according to the mind of the receiver, according to St. Thomas Aquinas.² So when the scrupulous person reads, “*If you love me, keep my commandments*”³, he will not focus on the friendship with God which the verse conveys but will, instead, hear, “If you keep my commandments, I will love you.” One can see how the following verses could be agonizing for the scrupulous:

- “*Be you therefore perfect, as also your heavenly Father is perfect.*”⁴
- “*With fear and trembling work out your salvation.*”⁵
- “*Whosoever shall look on a woman to lust after her hath already committed adultery with her in his heart.*”⁶
- “*He that shall blaspheme against the Holy Ghost shall never have forgiveness.*”⁷

With these verses ringing in his ears the scrupulous person goes to confession full of doubts, wondering whether his sins are venial or mortal. When he leaves the confessional, he wonders whether his confession was defective. Several possibilities come to his mind:

- his confessor might not have understood all the details of his sins.
- perhaps he failed to confess enough details, or missed a sin, or didn’t express himself in just the right way.
- he wonders whether God did not, or could not, forgive him, because of the gravity of his sins.

Sometimes, as a result, the scrupulous person thinks that he cannot receive the Holy Eucharist out of fear of offending God. Such a person may find it very difficult to be in a church where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, or even fear to be in physical proximity to a priest.

Scrupulosity is a desire for an impossible perfection. In modern psychology it is usually referred to as Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD). Obsessions are repeated thoughts or feelings which trigger anxiety and which severely interfere with normal functioning. Compulsions are repeated thoughts or actions which reduce anxiety. So, for example, a person who suffers from this condition may have an unwanted sexual thought that is persistent (obsession), which causes him great anxiety. To reduce this anxiety, he will immediately begin to pray for a long time (compulsion).

Numerous saints have experienced scrupulosity. St. Ignatius of Loyola “*doubted that his past sins were truly forgiven*” and “*compulsively examined his conscience for hours at a time*”.⁸ St. Therese of Lisieux used to examine and re-examine all her motives; her work, health and prayers suffered as a consequence of her uncertainty and doubt. St. Alphonsus de Liguori also suffered tremendously from scruples. These, and many others who have experienced scrupulosity, struggled with the condition and were healed by God’s grace. So, we must not think that those who carry the cross of scrupulosity are deficient or crazy. We must think of them as courageous for practicing their faith while bearing very difficult burdens.

²*Summa Theologica*, I, 75, 5, St. Thomas Aquinas

³ John 14:15

Ed. Note: all scriptural quotations are taken from the Douay-Rheims translation, unless otherwise noted

⁴ Matt. 5:48

⁵ Phil.2:12

⁶ Matt. 5:28

⁷ Mark 3:29

⁸*The Doubting Disease*, Joseph Ciarrocchi

CAUSES

"Let us note that traditional Christianity is a balance of doctrines, and not merely of doctrines but of emphases. You must not exaggerate in either direction, or the balance is disturbed." Ronald Knox⁹

"In all ages, the tendency of the heretic has been to single out one aspect of Christian life or doctrine, and treat it as if it were the whole." Ronald Knox¹⁰

Scrupulosity works like a heresy. Heresy is a Greek word meaning 'to pick and choose'. A scrupulous person tends to disregard much of the content of the Good News – such as *"Rejoice in the Lord always"*¹¹ – because he considers himself too great a sinner for the verse to apply to him. Thus, he develops a habit of not considering the whole of the Gospel, or the whole of the doctrine of Holy Mother Church, and this contributes to his condition.

Environmental

Scrupulosity is not caused by religion, as Freud would have us believe, but it can emanate from the way in which religion is presented. For example, it is indeed a law that one must attend Mass on Sundays. There is nothing wrong with the content of that truth. However, if someone thinks that he will become virtuous if he follows the law, then he might draw a line in his soul thus: going to church is good, missing church is bad. For the scrupulous person it is not enough to draw the line there, other lines must be drawn. Thus, missing the 'Prayers at the Foot of the Altar'¹² is displeasing to God, not saying preparatory prayers before Mass is displeasing to God, arriving ten minutes before Mass to pray, but not praying attentively, is displeasing to God ... line after line is drawn by the scrupulous conscience.

Just as religion, per se, cannot be blamed for causing scrupulosity, neither can parents. Many parents teach the Faith well, and yet a child can choose to focus on the laws of the Faith and not the virtues, thereby developing scruples. On the other hand, it is possible for children to be brought up in a performance-oriented home, where love is, or is perceived to be, conditional. "If you clean your room correctly, you'll receive my love" is perhaps never explicitly stated, but is understood as such by a child who perceives that his mom's affection is withdrawn until his room is clean. It is not uncommon for a child to transfer his notion of conditional love from his parents to God, and begin to think that his identity as a Catholic stems, not from his adoption as a child of God in baptism, but from his performance. He thinks that in order to receive perfect love he must behave perfectly.

Another source of difficulty can be the media, even the Catholic media. Most psychologists try to steer patients who suffer from OCD away from negative, sad or depressing news, as a morose atmosphere exacerbates OCD. Additionally, the pervading immorality in the media these days can trigger great remorse, and skepticism about proper behavior, in the anxious soul.

⁹*Enthusiasm*, Ronald Knox

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Phil. 4:4

¹² 'Prayers at the Foot of the Altar' are said by the priest at the beginning of Mass in the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite.

Physical

There is no evidence that OCD is genetic. Just because a parent has an anxiety disorder does not mean that his children, or grandchildren, will. It is possible that a tendency to anxiety is somehow transmitted from parent to child, but even that does not appear to be uniform. It seems clear that, similarly, scrupulosity is not determined by genetics. The Fathers of the Church considered scrupulosity – or psychasthenia, as the Greek Fathers called it – to be a spiritual problem which leads to a psychological malfunction.

Even though genes do not cause scrupulosity, there are certain physical imbalances which can exacerbate the condition. “*All things in moderation*”¹³ is an ancient phrase which contains a great deal of wisdom. The Church has always recommended temperance: avoiding excess in food, drink, drugs or medicine, tobacco and so on. In those cases where temperance is not possible (as in the case of alcoholism or chain smoking) she always recommends complete abstinence. This is important to consider with regard to scrupulosity as poor health is often linked to various kinds of depression. Depression, in turn, can engender obsessive thinking and intensify scrupulous thoughts.

The masters of the spiritual life frequently saw eating as something to be done simply and sparsely; they saw gluttony as a serious threat to the soul. St. Ignatius of Loyola put it this way: “*As to foods, greater and more complete abstinence is to be observed. For with regard to them the appetite tends more readily to be excessive, and temptation to be insistent. To avoid disorder concerning foods, abstinence may be practiced in two ways: first, by accustoming oneself to eat coarser foods; secondly, if delicacies are taken, to eat of them only sparingly.*”¹⁴ This approach was recommended by the earliest Fathers of the Church, and is still practiced today in the observance of the Rule of St. Benedict.

Two more physical factors to consider are sleep and exercise. Poor sleep hygiene can contribute significantly to an inordinate sadness. It is well-known that light is the key to waking up. Going into a bright light every morning at the same time sets our biological clocks better than anything. Leaving that light at the end of the day and getting into sleep clothes, while avoiding intense lights emanating from television and computer screens, contributes greatly to good rest. Irregular sleep patterns make the body feel worse. Lack of exercise reduces the body’s respiratory rate. It also decreases metabolism and energy levels. In short, poor sleep and lack of exercise make the flesh (which includes the brain) even weaker than it already is.

Psychological/ Intellectual

Like everyone else, the scrupulous man experiences temporary bouts of depression, fear or anxiety. Unlike everyone else, he can wrongly attribute his vague depression to sin, thinking that he has committed a mortal sin which has resulted in sadness. This erroneous association also works against progress in the interior life when it is applied to dreams. If a dream involves a fantasy of sin, the scrupulous man can stew over whether he has committed a sin or not. In all these false associations there is an ‘all-or-nothing’ pattern of thinking. The scrupulous person needs to be on his guard against this habit of thinking that if something is not done perfectly, it is automatically sinful.

¹³ “Nothing in excess” is carved on the facade of the Temple at Delphi

¹⁴ *Spiritual Exercises*, 212, St. Ignatius of Loyola

Heresies and errors can also act as a seedbed for scrupulosity. There was once a British monk named Pelagius, who taught that a man can observe God's laws by human effort alone, that grace was not needed to do so. If the heresy of Pelagianism works its way into the soul it is an easy step to thinking that any lack of perfection is entirely one's own fault. One thinks, "this business of salvation is my work, so I'd better be perfect when I ..." Thus salvation becomes something one must achieve by personal effort instead of by cooperation with grace.

Jansenism is another heresy in which scrupulosity can grow well. It emphasizes that Christ did not die for all, stresses man's sinfulness, and requires extreme penances on a regular basis. It leads to infrequent communions and flowers into scrupulosity as a matter of course.

Manichaeism states, on principle, that all matter is evil. If, for example, a child grows up with an extreme attitude to modesty – where the flesh is seen as evil because it is the cause of forbidden impulses – then the slightest catering to the demands or needs of the flesh can result in a torment which rejects the goodness of the body.

Spiritual

Does pride come into this? It would seem not, since many scrupulous persons do not see themselves as better than others, have a very low self-image, and do not want to remain in their condition. Pride is, however, part of the problem. This type of pride stems from an ignorance of God's love and mercy, and an oversensitive conscience. St. Therese of Lisieux - after being healed of oversensitivity and scruples - learned from Our Lord that her troubles arose from "... *self sufficiency and self-esteem, from a vainglorious concern about her own reactions and the inordinate value that she put on herself.*"¹⁵ Christ also said to St. Faustina, regarding her doubts and temptations, "*Sensitiveness and discouragement are the fruits of self-love. You should not become discouraged but strive to make my love reign in place of your self-love.*"¹⁶

Pride is inordinate self-esteem. It leads to thinking too much about oneself, and to desiring to control one's life too much. It is opposed to humility, which acknowledges cheerfully that all good comes from God. Thus, pride can impel a scrupulous man to spend inordinate amounts of time dwelling on his sin and lack of perfection, instead of dwelling on love towards God and neighbor. The Catechism of the Catholic Church lists indifference and acedia as sins against Charity. One who is indifferent neglects to meditate on God's love; one who has acedia (spiritual sloth) refuses to accept God's joy at times.¹⁷ The more a person feels sorry for himself, the more his reserves of energy drop, the more he feels sorry for himself.

Finally, pride can make the scrupulous man's condition worse by leading him to distrust representatives of the Church. Even though the Church has been dealing with scrupulosity for two millennia, the scrupulous man can worry whether a confessor is completely holy, and is quick to look for flaws of character in a confessor or his advice. The advice he receives may never be strict enough, since the scrupulous soul often gravitates to what is severe, morose or puritanical.

¹⁵*The Secret of the Little Flower*, Henri Gheon

¹⁶ *Divine Mercy in My Soul*, 1488, St. Faustina Kowalska

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2094

Diabolical

We should not overlook the temptations which come from hell. The immediate purpose of all temptation is to persuade us to quit trying to be virtuous and give up the interior life. Discouragement and despair are the devil's primary tools in his attempt to separate us from union with God. As Fr. John Hardon pointed out, devils attack by sowing evil thoughts in the mind and, to some degree, affecting the imagination and the five senses.¹⁸ To fight the good fight we should know some basic facts about the potential of demons to harm us:

1. There can be no actual union between a human soul and the devil.
2. Devils cannot read our thoughts (though they can guess from our expressions and body language and deduce what we are thinking).
3. They attack us systematically, taking turns.
4. They vary in strength, boldness and malice.
5. They don't do battle without effort on their part.
6. Their power to hurt us does not depend on their will, but on what God permits.
7. Their power over us increases or decreases according to the effectiveness of the resistance they meet.

If the scrupulous man is unaware of the tactics of the devil, temptations will impact his condition more than the average man. The devil will seek to put a false image of God in the heart of the scrupulous person by convincing him that God is not a loving Father but a despot, whose demands are arbitrary, unfair and harsh. Even so, he tempted Eve in the Garden.

St. Ignatius of Loyola put it this way: "*Our infernal enemy observes with malignant attention what the stamp of our conscience is, whether it is delicate or relaxed. If delicate, he tries to render it more susceptible still; he endeavors to reduce it to the last degree of trouble and anguish, so as to stop its progress in the spiritual life*".¹⁹ Our Lord told St. Faustina "*My child, know that the greatest obstacles to holiness are discouragement and an exaggerated anxiety. These will deprive you of the ability to practice virtue*".²⁰

Since the scrupulous man thinks he should be able to control his thoughts, we can see how the enemy will tempt him. For the one whose scruple is sexuality, the enemy seeks to persuade him that he is a pervert, and going to hell. To the one whose scruple is blasphemy he says, "You have just blasphemed again; you are going to hell". To the one whose scruple is gluttony he says, "You overate again; you are going to hell". And so on. The devil falsely accuses the man of being unforgivably wicked, thereby creating a wedge of fear and anxiety between him and God. Instead of praising God the scrupulous person is deceived into thinking that he must micromanage his thoughts and feelings in order to gain the love of God, with the result that he becomes focused on himself rather than on the love of God and neighbor.

¹⁸*All My Liberty; Discernment of Spirits*, Father John Hardon, S.J.

¹⁹*The Wisdom of the Saints: An Anthology*, Jill HaakAdels

²⁰*Divine Mercy in My Soul*, 1488, St.FaustinaKowalska

HEALING

The healing power of Christ is greater than any wound.

*"The favors of the Lord are not exhausted, his mercies are not spent;
They are renewed each morning, so great is his faithfulness.
My portion is the Lord, says my soul; therefore will I hope in him."²¹*

Ultimately God will give the graces necessary for healing, but the scrupulous person must cooperate with these graces by reforming his conscience and habits of thinking.

Spiritual Direction

The first task that the scrupulous person must accomplish is that of allowing God to help him find the right spiritual director, the one who will help him reshape his conscience and transform his image of God. This is not an easy task. St. Frances de Sales once said that only one in a hundred priests could be the director of a particular man. The ratio is probably lower nowadays as there are fewer orthodox priests and, in general, there is great ignorance of the interior life due to bad seminaries. As there are fewer priests, those who are active are often very, very busy. For this reason, it is essential that he pray that God choose this priest for him. This will be an act of humility, as it will go against the pride of scrupulosity. Once he chooses a director it is critical that he follow the advice of his director absolutely. St. Alphonsus de Liguori said, *"It is wise to choose a good confessor and to follow his direction in all spiritual matters, and even in temporal matters of importance. The relationship should not be ended without good reason. St. Philip Neri teaches: "Let those who desire to advance in the way of God put themselves under the direction of an enlightened confessor, and let them obey their director as they would the voice of God. Whoever does this may feel assured that they will never have to render an account to God of what they choose". This teaching conforms to the words of Jesus Christ, "He that heareth you, heareth me" (Luke 10:16)."*²²

The saints are unanimous in their teaching that obedience is a strong weapon against the devil in spiritual combat. To exercise good obedience, it will be necessary for the scrupulous man to avoid looking for character flaws in his spiritual father, or he will end up practicing 'human obedience' rather than 'divine obedience'.

St. Ignatius once wrote the following to a young Jesuit who was suffering from scrupulosity: *"Humble yourself and trust that Divine Providence will rule and guide you by means of your superior. And believe me, if you have true humility and submissiveness, your scruples will not cause you so much trouble. Pride is the fuel they feed on, and it is pride that places more reliance on one's own judgment and less on the judgment of others whom we trust".*²³ The famous Fr. Jordan Aumann, O.P. states the following: *"Souls that are moved by the spirit of God accept cheerfully the advice and counsel of their directors or others who have authority over them. This spirit of obedience, docility, and submission is one of the clearest signs that a particular inspiration or movement is from God. This is especially true in the case of the educated, who have a greater tendency to be attached to their own opinions."*²⁴

²¹ Lam. 3: 22-24, New American Bible

²²Way of Salvation and Perfection, Rule 8 ,St. Alphonsus de Liguori

²³ Letter from Ignatius Loyola to Fr. Juan Marin, from Rome, June 24, 1556

²⁴Spiritual Theology, Jordan Aumann, O.P.

The spiritual father who accepts the burden of being a director must insist that he be the only confessor of the one to be healed, lest the scrupulous person jump from one confessor to another, only to become confused by different counsels. He will have to gain the trust of the scrupulous person – which can be established over a period of time but is rarely present at the beginning – due to the pride of the scrupulous in focusing on the faults, either real or imagined, of the father. The father must also insist on the absolute obedience of the son. This obedience is necessary in order to be healed of scrupulosity. It is not easy work. The scrupulous have a tendency to repeat the same questions, and to question advice. The confessor must try to stop this habit, as it only exacerbates the problem. He must also establish certain rules. For example, he might insist that the son not examine his conscience for more than one minute a day, that he may go to confession no more than once a week, and so on. These, and similar rules, eliminate many of the hyper-negative thoughts and doubts which cause so much anxiety.

Expert directors will encourage the scrupulous to keep written logs, or diaries, to help them keep track of their obsessions or compulsions. It is generally agreed that those who keep a log and share it with the confessor make more progress than those who do not. The son needs particular insights into God's love and mercy. Focusing on the mercy of God is of paramount importance in combatting the false tendencies of scrupulosity.

Prayer

If one is watching how one is praying, then one is watching, not praying. Worrying whether one's prayer was said perfectly, or whether it was incomplete, or whether one was too distracted, can result in one's looking too much at himself and not enough at God. Contrast this worry with the instruction of St. Paul: "*Be nothing solicitous: but in everything, by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your petitions be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasseth all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*"²⁵ This little passage contains the basics of what is needed for good prayer: once a man puts himself in God's presence as best he can, so that he is not concentrating on worldly things, he will no longer be anxious, and will be able to adore God, ask Him for the favors he needs, express gratitude to Him, and therefore experience much peace. "*Fear not, only believe*", Christ said to a ruler of a synagogue.²⁶ Fear is an excellent thing, very useful, and necessary for many. The man who suffers from scrupulosity, however, must concentrate on belief in the mercy of God and not his own inadequacies. Everyone needs to learn the lesson of St. Peter who, while running on the water, took his eyes off Christ to concentrate on the waves (symbolizing the troubles of life), which caused him to sink and cry out in terror at the thought of drowning.

The tripartite enemies of the soul – the world, the flesh and the devil – are not to be taken lightly, as if they did not exist. No one, however, should *worry* about these enemies. We should not stew about them. Stewing about the world could make armed survivalism a chief occupation: reading constantly about what is wrong with the government, stocking up on ammunition and potable water. Stewing about the flesh could take nutrition to an extreme, with constant fuss about getting enough anti-oxidants. Stewing about the devil could lead to covering the walls of a home with crosses. Look at the story of Saints Martha and Mary in the house of Lazarus: "*Now it came to pass, as they went, that he entered into a certain town: and a certain woman named Martha received him into her house. And she had a sister*

²⁵ Phil.4:6-7

²⁶ Mark 5:36

called Mary, who, sitting also at the Lord's feet, heard his word. But Martha was busy about much serving. Who stood and said: Lord, hast thou no care that my sister hath left me alone to serve? Speak to her therefore, that she help me. And the Lord answering, said to her Martha, Martha, thou art careful and art troubled about many things: But one thing is necessary. Mary hath chosen the best part, which shall not be taken away from her."²⁷ Martha is not yet a saint; she seems somewhat obsessed with *doing* things for God and *earning* His love. Mary, on the other hand, is at peace because she is *being* a child of God and *letting* Him love her. The scrupulous man focuses on not sinning; not sinning becomes the object of his worship rather than the Lord Himself. He must learn to turn to God and worship directly as Mary did.

It seems that the scrupulous man does turn to God, doesn't it? He prays for deliverance from his condition, he confesses his sins, receives communion, etc. but he can still be plagued with erroneous thoughts of God. So, in addition to following the advice and commands of his director, he must ask for the grace to believe that God will take all his thoughts, no matter how blasphemous or evil they may seem. The sooner he learns to give all his thoughts to God, who can see them and knows them anyway, the sooner he will be healed. He must trust God, who desires his company, his conversation; God desires him. We should all remember that thoughts are not sinful in themselves. While the notion of giving evil thoughts to God may seem odd or inappropriate, we should remember the 136th Psalm: "O daughter of Babylon, miserable: blessed shall he be who shall repay thee thy payment which thou hast paid us. Blessed be he that shall take and dash thy little ones against the rock."²⁸ On the surface, this looks like pure Jewish vengeance against the Babylonians, which, given the way the Babylonians behaved, is not surprising; but the most important sense of Scripture—the *sensus plenior*—would have us look for a fuller explanation. St. Benedict tells us that the precious baby whose head we are to dash against a rock is our favorite sin.²⁹ Another interpretation is that Christ is the Rock against whom the destruction of the temptation can take place before it reaches maturity (a full blown sin). The scrupulous man can, therefore, give his sinful thoughts to Christ once a day (doing it over and over is a mistake) and Christ will do the rest.

Sacred Scripture

The effective use of Sacred Scripture does much to further a man's conversion and heal him of scrupulosity. "*Qui ignorant scripturas ignorant Christum*"³⁰, St. Jerome once said. "*He who is ignorant of the Scriptures is ignorant of Christ.*" It's no wonder that so many people leave the Faith; they hardly know what it is. It is no wonder that so many drift to the East; they have almost no knowledge of Christ. Parents, as the first teachers of their children, must teach their children the Scriptures. Without knowledge of the basics of Sacred Scripture a Catholic will be blind. "*Thy word is a lamp to my feet, and a light to my paths.*"³¹ Our Lord Himself led the way, providing us a perfect example of how to live, by studying the Scriptures all His life, and alluding to them constantly.

"*Faith then cometh by hearing; and hearing by the word of Christ.*"³² The Faith is God's gift to the one who actively hears or listens, to the one who turns his will to the Lord. Faith, which is the result of this turning, gives all believers the protection they need to resist the constant, nagging accusations of the

²⁷ Luke 10:38-42

²⁸ Psalm 136:8-9

²⁹*The Rule of St. Benedict*, Prologue, St. Benedict

³⁰*Commentary on Isaiah*, Prologue Nn.1.2:CCL 73, 1-3, St. Jerome

³¹ Psalm 118:105

³² Romans 10:17

enemy, who seeks to discourage and cause despair. *“In all things taking the shield of faith, wherewith you may be able to extinguish all the fiery darts of the most wicked one.”*³³ For the scrupulous person it is very important to read Sacred Scripture while focusing on the mercy of God because many, many passages can be difficult to meditate upon. Here are some examples of the kind of scripture which can liberate the soul to experience the freedom of the children of God:

- *“Fear is not in charity: but perfect charity casteth out fear, because fear hath pain. And he that feareth is not perfected in charity. Let us therefore love God: because God hath first loved us.”*³⁴
- *“Fear not, for I am with thee: turn not aside, for I am thy God. I have strengthened thee and have helped thee: and the right hand of my just one hath upheld thee.”*

Recollection

In addition to praying without fear, resting in the Lord, and knowledge of Sacred Scripture, turning to God involves praying without ceasing. A priest has this laid out for him in his Divine Office, so that from morning to night the priest has regular times of prayer. For the laity who are not bound to the Office, to pray without ceasing does not mean that discontinuing all other activities except prayer. It means being recollected, aware of the presence of God and His omniscience.

First, to have this recollection it is necessary to speak to God throughout the day as we would speak to a loving father. St. Paul reminds us that we should speak to God using the word *Abba*, or father (one can still hear Arab children calling for their dads by this word over in the Middle East).

Second, the majority of the prayer of the scrupulous man should be outside of himself: praising and thanking God, and praying for others. *“In all things give thanks: for this is the will of Christ Jesus concerning you all.”*³⁵

Third, he must spend time just listening to God like St. Samuel the Prophet. *“And the Lord came and stood. And he called, as he had called the other times: Samuel, Samuel. And Samuel said: Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth.”*³⁶ If the scrupulous spend periods of time listening to the Lord, they will learn how to *be* and not simply *do*. This will also help them discern between being tempted and consenting to temptation.

Fourth, devotion to Our Lady is a sure path to the Lord. Mothers know how to calm worried or hurt children. Our spiritual mother knows precisely what to do to calm us.

Fifth, concentrating on the mercy of God by reading the diary of St. Faustina³⁷ and praying the Divine Mercy Chaplet helps cut through the thorns of anxiety.

Sixth, frequent confession and communion are the pre-eminent paths to holiness for everyone. If the scrupulous person wonders whether his confessions were satisfactory, his past sins forgiven, or his communions good, his director must be firm with him. St. Alphonsus de Liguori was more than

³³Ephesians 6:16

³⁴I John 4:18-19

³⁵I Thess. 5:18

³⁶I Kings 3.10

³⁷*Divine Mercy in My Soul*, St. Faustina Kowalska

firm, “*You make me tremble with your fear that all your confessions and communions are sacrilegious. Do you not see that it is thus that the devil has deceived you in making you believe this? You should believe what so many others and I have told you, that in these matters of doubt and troubles of conscience you are foolish, extravagant, and incapable of forming judgment. This is what you should believe. You must then trust what has been told to you. For myself, I plead in the name of God, and your confessor will tell you the same thing: Continue to communicate regardless of all your doubts, no matter how strong or obstinate they may be. And do this on my responsibility; yes, I am answerable for this to God, for your conscience is substantially known to me.*”³⁸

The Moral Law

The belief that one can be saved by a strict or perfect compliance with the Old Law is incorrect. The Old Law served well as a teacher (or pedagogue, as the Douay Rheims translation puts it), who often corrected and punished. Man was confined by the Old Law, in order to separate him from sin. The New Law serves to enable us not only to avoid sin but to approach God as a loving father. “*But before the faith came, we were kept under the law shut up, unto that faith which was to be revealed. Wherefore the law was our pedagogue in Christ: that we might be justified by faith. But after the faith is come, we are no longer under a pedagogue. For you are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus.*”³⁹ Not that we want to think of these words like a smiling television evangelist. God is not a pal, and He will not be mocked. G. K. Chesterton had it right when he spoke of the Old Testament as the story of the awful separation of man and God, and the New Testament as the awful union of God and man.

Conscience

St. Gregory Nazianzen said that to truly know God one must be at ease. St. Teresa of Avila said, “*Let nothing disturb you.*” This applies to everyone who strives to grow in the interior life, but it is especially important that one who suffers from scrupulosity not become agitated. He must realize that thoughts – even horrible ones – are mere temptations, not sins. Even our good Lord endured temptations.

If a scrupulous man wastes time in wondering whether he has consented to sin he will be perturbed, and ill at ease. He needs to stop that waste of time and energy by ascertaining whether he is certain he consented, as certain as two plus two equals four. If he is absolutely certain then he can admit his sin and ask God’s pardon. If he is not certain he must think it is not a sin. He must make a decision not to worry in either case, but instead trust God. He also needs to understand the difference between feeling and consent in order not to be disturbed. If Jack puts a spoonful of pepper on Jill’s tongue when she thought it was going to be honey, Jill would feel it, experience a bad taste, gag and spit it out. True, it was in her, and it was very unpleasant, but she did not consent to it. The pepper is like a blasphemous thought about God; the scrupulous man feels it and knows it is inside him, but he does not consent to it. There is no sin because he did not want the thought. If Jill puts a spoonful of poisoned sugar on Jack’s tongue he would feel it, but if he knew it was poison, he would spit it out immediately. This is like a lustful thought; the thought is pleasant perhaps, but Jack does not consent because he knows it is wrong. He did not desire or will the feeling or the thought. He must not let his feelings convince him that he consented. God sees the anxiety of the scrupulous person and knows his heart to be true.

³⁸*Liguorian*, Vol. 33, Redemptorists

³⁹Gal. 3:23-26

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that one “*must obey the certain judgment of his conscience*” but that it can happen that one’s “*moral conscience remains in ignorance and makes erroneous judgments about acts to be performed or already committed.*”⁴⁰ The Church teaches that all of us have a duty to correct any errors in our moral conscience; for the scrupulous man this is best done by obedience to a spiritual father. He must change his thinking in order to heal and be at peace.

Another pitfall he must avoid in order to remain undisturbed is wondering whether he is in a state of grace. Human life must proceed without absolute certitude on many things, and God wants us to do our present duty without striving to be certain of things which are beyond us. The tormentors of St. Joan of Arc pestered her about whether she was in a state of grace. Her answer was perfectly simple: “*If I am in a state of grace may God deign to keep me there; if I am not may He deign to put me in it.*”⁴¹ That is an excellent example of how to live in the freedom of the children of God.

A sense of gratitude for blessings received and a sense of humor are also excellent means of defraying disturbance. It’s as though thanksgiving and humor dispel the toxic emotions of fear and anxiety, and work against pride and self-pity, making one much less vulnerable to the temptations of the devil. If a man were to write down, each morning, three things for which he is thankful to God, after 30 days he would have 90 different things. This can change his image of God.

Lastly, he must not worry about dreams that involve immoral content. Dreams are not conscious, so there cannot be any consent involved.

RESOURCES/FURTHER READING

- *Crippled By Fear: Understanding the Scrupulous*, Fr. Daniel Lowry, CSSR

⁴⁰ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1790

⁴¹ Trial of Condemnation, Third Session, Feb. 24

Prayers for the Scrupulous

A Morning Offering is perfect for giving everything to God, including our failures:

O my Jesus, through the Immaculate Heart of Mary, I offer Thee all my prayers, works, joys, sufferings, thoughts, feelings and impulses of this day, in union with the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass throughout the world, in reparation for my sins, for the intentions of thy Most Sacred Heart, for the unification of all Christians, and for the intentions of our Holy Father the Pope. Amen.

For surrendering our thoughts to God during the day:

Receive, O Lord, all my liberty. Take my memory, my understanding, and my entire will. Whatsoever I have or hold, Thou hast given me; I give it all back to Thee and commit it wholly to be governed by Thy will. Thy love and Thy grace give unto me, and I am rich enough and ask for nothing more.⁴²

To find a good director:

O Lord, who desirest not the death of a sinner but that he should turn and live, Thou who didst come down to earth in order to restore life to those lying dead through sin, and in order to make them worthy of seeing Thee, the true light, as far as that is possible to man, send me a man who knows Thee, so that in serving him, and subjecting myself to him with all my strength, as to Thee, and in doing Thy will in his I may please Thee, the only true God, and so that even I, a sinner, may be worthy of Thy kingdom. Amen.⁴³

Rules for the Scrupulous to Follow

1. Do not repeat a sin in confession when it has been told in a previous confession even if you doubt it was told, or doubt it was told in a sufficiently adequate and complete way.
2. Do not tell doubtful sins in confession, only clear and certain ones.
3. Do not repeat your penance after confession, or any of the words of your penance, on the score that you were distracted or may not have said the words properly.
4. Do not worry about breaking your fast before receiving our Lord in Holy Communion unless you actually put food and drink in your mouth and swallow it in the same way you do when you eat a meal.
5. Do not hesitate to look at any crucifix or statue in church, at home, or anywhere else, for fear that you receive bad thoughts in your mind or imagination. If such thoughts come, they are not sinful at all.
6. Do not consider yourself guilty of bad thoughts, desires or feelings unless you can honestly swear under oath before the all-truthful God that you remember clearly and certainly consenting to them.
7. Do not disobey your confessor when he tells you never to make another general confession of past sins already confessed.
8. Act on the belief that whenever you are in doubt as to whether or not you are obliged to do or not to do something; you can take it as certain that you are not obliged.

⁴² St. Ignatius of Loyola

⁴³ St. Symeon

9. If, before you perform or omit an act, you are doubtful whether or not it is sinful for you, you shall assume as certain that it is not sinful and shall proceed to act without any dread of sin whatever.
10. You shall put your total trust in Jesus Christ knowing that He loves you as only God can love, and that He has no intention of letting you lose your soul.
11. Remember: feelings, impulses and ideas are neither acts of the will nor accomplished facts.
12. Remember: temptations are not sins. Even Jesus was tempted by the Devil and never sinned.