

Scruples

By a Redemptorist.

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WHAT ARE SCRUPLES?

Scruples are a malady that affects the mind: or rather, that particular activity of the mind, which has to do with judging right and wrong, and which is called conscience.

The scrupulous person has a sick conscience. In other things, his mind works perfectly, and even in some matters of conscience, it may function correctly. But there is always at least one sphere of conscience in which it is completely unreliable. It is like a car that gets suddenly out of control and swerves unpredictably in all directions. Or like a clock that goes all right when it is laid face down; but as soon as it is put in any other position it will go fast or slow or even stop.

THE NORMAL CONSCIENCE.

The average person of normal conscience judges right and wrong easily, like two and two are four. He knows, definitely, when he has done wrong. Occasionally he may doubt whether he has really consented to sin; but this is a straight-out doubt. He solves it at once. He is not certain and that is the end of it; and so with a little act of sorrow to God he dismisses the matter from his mind.

At times, he may not know whether a certain thing is right for him to do. He finds out before he does it. He always acts with a definite conscience; to him, right and wrong are like black and white. But what about the scrupulous person?

THE SCRUPULOUS CONSCIENCE.

This unfortunate person is forever hesitating between right and wrong; he can never make up his mind about it. Sin faces him everywhere. He cannot distinguish between temptation and consent. Every thought that flashes into his mind, every feeling that assails him seems to be a sin. He lives in a kind of straight-jacket that robs him of all freedom. He is almost afraid to do anything.

A doubt comes and he cannot dismiss it. It nags at him and clouds his mind and fills him with fear and misery. Then he begins to feel that he must have consented to sin. He mistakes this feeling for certainty.

He goes back and examines his doubts, only to make them worse. He can never explain himself enough in confession. Some priests refuse to listen and he has all the torturing fear of having made bad confessions. All efforts to straighten things out seem to fail. Perhaps at last he finds a priest who will listen. He goes out of the box as if walking on air. He is right at last. But even before next morning's Communion, he is in distress again. He has forgotten something; something has not been explained, or something has occurred since his confession. The priest made him promise to go to Holy Communion, no matter what happened; but dare he go? He forces himself to do so. An awful dread comes over him that he has been guilty of sacrilege. His prayers of thanksgiving seem a hollow mockery. How can he ever set things right?

Desperately he goes to one confessor after another in a vain search for peace. His confusion and misery increase almost to the point of despair. To ordinary people all this seems quite crazy; but to its unfortunate victim it is very real and very tragic. How does it happen that a person, who is quite ordinary in other ways, is so extraordinary in this?

THE CAUSES OF SCRUPLES.

Sometimes it is a matter of health and the scrupulous need to see a doctor as well as a priest.

More often, it is a hangover from childhood days.

As a child, he formed a completely wrong idea of God and of sin. God was not a loving Father to be loved in return, but a kind of policeman to be feared. Quite harmless things were regarded as sins, even as mortal sins!

A very selfish upbringing can also be a contributing cause. Such people never think of others and are completely centered in themselves. This is important when we come to apply a remedy.

Scruples may follow from real sins and especially from bad confessions. In such cases, they are a violent reaction in an effort to avoid the same sins again. Actually, this would be better achieved by saner tactics.

But whatever the cause, scruples can be harmful to the soul — and a remedy needs to be applied.

THEIR BAD EFFECTS.

Besides the injury they might do to general bodily health and mental balance, as well as their nuisance to others, scruples can be quite harmful to the soul.

They make prayer very difficult. Confession, which is a sacrament of pardon and peace, becomes a real ordeal. Holy Communion is likely to be often omitted, when it would be most beneficial.

The practice of virtue is almost out of the question. The scrupulous person is so occupied with doubts and worries and supposed sins, that he completely overlooks his real faults and sins. He becomes more and more selfish, sharp-tongued, stubborn, proud, impatient, neglectful of duty, difficult to live with, et cetera.

Finally, the strain of scruples can be so great that the victim will give up prayer and the sacraments and perhaps, all practice of religion.

THE REMEDIES.

Desperate diseases require desperate remedies, and scruples are certainly a desperate and stubborn ailment. Here one must be cruel, to be kind. The scrupulous person must not think that the priest fails to understand his case or that he is being unsympathetic. The priest has studied it all as a doctor studies disease: and he knows quite well that there is only one remedy. What is it?

AN ABSOLUTE ESSENTIAL.

A blind man crosses a busy street safely as if he has a trained guide-dog; it is his angel. The scrupulous person has his angel, too: it is "blind obedience." If he shuts his eyes and allows himself to be guided, he will pass safely through the maze of all his doubts and worries. He must not try to see the road himself. His confessor will tell him what to do. He must obey blindly and faithfully, no matter how he feels. If he does this, he will be secure and will soon find peace.

WHAT THE PRIEST IS AIMING AT.

When a patient is suffering from a stomach ulcer, the doctor will prescribe a diet. He will forbid all foods that would cause irritation and prescribe those that will leave the ulcer unaffected. Gradually it will dry up and heal of itself; just because it has been left alone, nature has done its work.

It is the same with a skin infection. If you yield to the very natural inclination of scratching it, there may be momentary relief; but soon you will realize that you have caused inflammation and bleeding. It is now really sore.

The priest's aim is to let your scruples die a natural death. He wants to isolate them and leave them there. This is why he tells you not to mention your doubts or worries and not even to think of them. Quarantine them; put them behind barb-wire and leave them there. Obey him absolutely. Even if he should make some slight mistake at times in guiding you, you will make no mistake in following him. This is God's will for you and it is your only hope. God will ask no account of you for what you do under obedience. Your confessor will have to account for that. Sometimes when the priest says: "I'll take all the responsibility", the poor anguished penitent will blurt out: "But Father, you'll be damned!" Don't worry. The priest knows what he is doing. God lays on him the responsibility of helping you. Mind your own business and let him mind his.

A PAINFUL PROCESS.

This is not going to be easy. Like many medical treatments, it is going to cause you pain. But it is well worth it for the peace you will ultimately get.

Remember that when you go to confession, you are not going in order to get worries off your mind, but to get sin off your soul. They can be two completely different things. If you had a headache when you went into the confessional, would you expect it to be gone when you came out? If it was still there when you came out would you think that you had made a bad confession? Certainly not.

You must treat your worries the same way. They have nothing to do with your confession. Any faults that may have occurred, even though the priest has forbidden you to mention them, will be removed from your soul by absolution. They still may remain in your mind.

FEELING AND FACT.

Don't worry if you do not feel sorrow for your sins. In your present state, you can hardly feel anything except misery. In any case, you don't have to feel sorry. Good will is all that God asks. If you want to be sorry, then you are sorry.

"You were distracted during your Act of Contrition!" No matter. Even if by mistake you said the Confiteor or the Act of Faith instead of an Act of Contrition, it would not harm your confession. For a good confession, you need to have sorrow; you do not need to talk about it.

You would not have to come to confession unless you were sorry and wanted your sins pardoned. Your very confession is an act of contrition. So you see how foolish many worries are!

SOME GENERAL HINTS.

1. Don't repeat prayers just because you think you have said them with distraction. Say them once and leave it at that.
2. Don't make a special effort to feel or mean your prayers. Just say them.

3. In examining your conscience at any time, but especially before confession, never examine doubts. Keep to things of which you are quite certain. If the priest forbids you to examine your conscience at all, obey him. Don't go back on confessions.
4. Don't mention doubts or worries in confession. Tell real sins that are certain. As we said before, everything will be covered by the absolution.
5. Don't be trying to feel satisfied. Try to do what you are told. If you can do this, you have reason to be very satisfied. It will not be easy.
6. Concentrate on your faults of which you have no doubt. Be sorry for them and try to overcome them. Forget the others.
7. Try not to think of yourself. Think of others and see what you can do to oblige and help them. Do some acts of charity to the sick and the poor. This is one of the best ways of curing scruples.
8. When the priest tells you to go against your scruples by doing the very things you are afraid of, be sure to obey. If he tells you in moments of indecision to do whatever you like, or to do what you find easier, obey him and have no fear. You will not be committing a sin.
9. Don't omit Holy Communion through fear or doubt. Say the words of an act of contrition and go to the altar in peace. This is certainly a good Holy Communion.
10. The mere fact that you want to examine into something shows at once that it is a doubt for you. Forget it.
11. Read spiritual books, et cetera, that give you confidence in God. You need plenty of it. Avoid books that depress you.
12. Try to be normal in everything and do what other good people do. Enjoy the amusements that they enjoy. Make others happy.
13. Enlarge your heart; you are dealing with a Father who is all loving. It does not please Him to see you mean-spirited and narrow. He does not deserve to be treated as if He were a tyrant.

THE CURE.

Is it possible for a scrupulous person to be really cured? Certainly. Many have been cured. Don't imagine that you are the only one with this affliction, or that your case is something special. All cases of scruples are the same. That is why the priest knows at once how to treat them. The only ones who cannot be cured are those who will not obey.

What would you think of a patient who would take half the medicine prescribed by a doctor and then, finding that he was not cured at once, would throw out the rest and look for another doctor? And what would any sensible person think if he continued the same performance with one doctor after another?

If you are patient and obedient, all will be well before long.

Among the saints, it is true, we can find a rare case in which God allows this affliction to continue for years. But you are probably not in that class! Even in those cases, you will find that their scruples never interfered with their ordinary life. Saint Jane de Chantal suffered in this way for about 40 years. Saint Francis de Sales forbade her to mention her doubts in confession and she obeyed. "I never mentioned them," she says, "because I was never certain of having consented."

Others did not know of her suffering and she was always bright and gay especially with the younger nuns.

Saint Francis said of her: "Mother de Chantal is like a deaf musician, who plays exquisitely to the delight of others, but gets no joy from it herself."

Obedience is the remedy for all scrupulous souls.

A FINAL FEAR.

"If I ignore all my worries and doubts, I will become careless and lax and fall into sin."

This is much more likely to happen if you continue as you are. Virtue will be so distasteful and difficult that you may easily give it up. But if you do what is recommended above, here is what will happen:

A WORD OF ENCOURAGEMENT.

You will pray more easily, more often and with greater profit. Because you will realize that feelings don't matter. All you need is good will enough to say the words: the words of a prayer are a prayer.

Confession will be a simple, business-like matter, as easy as eating your breakfast. Holy Communion will never be omitted; and this will do you more good than all the other things put together.

You will now be dealing with your real faults and improving all the time. You will be so busy trying to do good to others, that no time will be left for self.

Even if you cannot do all this at once — and it will be hard work — provided you keep trying, every step you take will be a step forward.

IN PRACTICE.

Say often: "Most Sacred Heart of Jesus, I place my trust in You." This is what you need most. Each time you repeat it, trust will be strengthened in your soul, even though you don't feel it. Just like the grass that is always growing without noise and without fuss.

Our Lord's words are infallibly true: "My yoke is sweet and my burden light." Up till now, that yoke has been so loose and shifty on your shoulders that it has been chafing and galling. Fix it firmly by obedience and you will go forward with a light step.

Have no fear. Your heavenly Mother will never desert her child. Ask her often to obtain for you that generous, loyal and, unselfish love for Jesus, which you see in Magdalen and in the dying Thief.

"Why are you fearful? O you of little Faith!" Then He commanded the winds and the sea, and there came a great calm. He may sleep in the boat of your heart, but He is still there.

THE ADVICE OF A SAINT.

Saint Alphonsus Liguori is a Doctor of the Church, a Prince among moral theologians and Patron of Confessors. He was a most experienced missionary and guide of souls. Here is his advice to you:

"The scrupulous person ought to act under obedience, to look upon his scrupulous fear as foolish, and so to act with freedom."

"If a scrupulous person is unable in his darkness to lay aside his scruples at once, or to call clearly to mind the obedience laid on him by his confessor — and some anxious consciences are unable to do this, perplexed as they are through the fear that weighs upon them — in that case he does not sin, even though he acts with a positive fear of sinning. A scrupulous person ought at such a time to despise his fear, because it offers no true test of conscience."

DIALOGUE WITH THE SAINT.

Saint Alphonsus puts the matter of scruples into the form of question and answer between himself and the troubled soul:

QUESTION. Have you told your past sins in confession?

ANSWER. Yes, Father. I have not only made a general confession of them, but I have confessed them many times over.

QUESTION. And what does your confessor say?

ANSWER. He has forbidden me to make further mention of what belongs to my past life. But I always feel disquieted, continually fearing that I may not have explained myself sufficiently. I am, moreover, tormented by thousands of temptations to unbelief, impurity and pride. I drive them away but still I am always fearful that I may in some way have tacitly consented to them.

QUESTION. What does your confessor say with regard to these bad thoughts?

ANSWER. He wishes me not to confess them, except when I can swear at first sight that I had consented to them. What do you say, Father?

QUESTION. What do I say? I repeat my recommendation to you to be obedient to your confessor. Saint John of the Cross says: "When you are unfaithful to your confessor, you are so to Jesus Christ, who has said: 'He that despises you, despises me'. Not to rest satisfied with what one's confessor says is pride and lack of faith."

ANSWER. Yes, Father. I will obey.

THE SAINT'S CONCLUDING WORDS.

"Let scrupulous souls, then, suffer this cross of theirs with resignation. It is for their profit, that they may be humbler, may guard better against occasions of sin that are beyond doubt and seriously dangerous, and that they may commend themselves more often to the Lord and learn to put greater trust in divine goodness. Meanwhile, let them often have recourse to the most holy Virgin Mary, who is called, and is in truth, Mother of Mercy and Comforter of the afflicted.

"While they blindly obey, they may assure themselves of not being abandoned by that Lord who will have all men saved, and who, loving 'good will' as he does, never suffers a really obedient soul to perish.

"No one has hoped in the Lord, and has been confounded." Ecclesiasticus 2:11.

"Casting all your care upon him, for he has care of you." 1 Peter 5:7.
