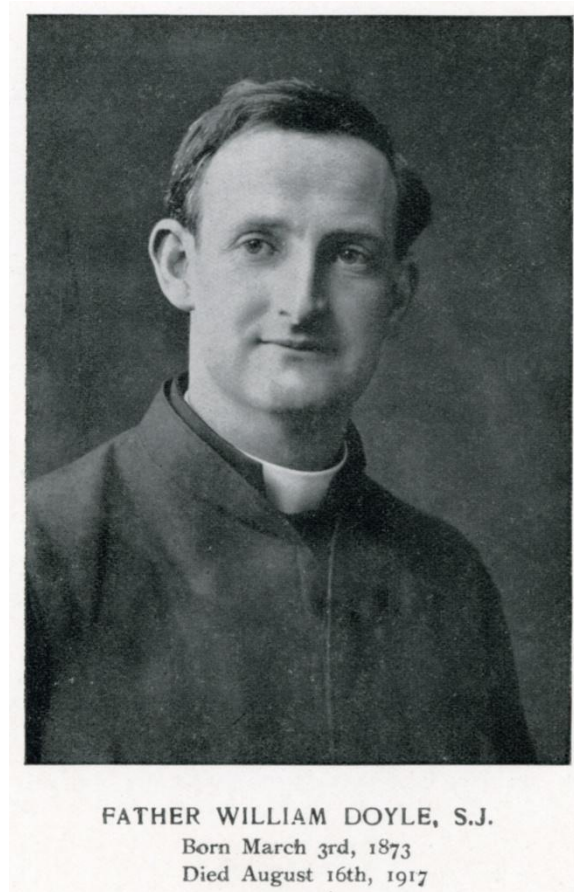


SCRUPLES AND THEIR TREATMENT

By Fr. William Doyle S.J.



The manuscript copy of this booklet was found among the papers of the late Father William Doyle, S.J. It is partly a translation, partly an adaptation, of L'Ange Conducteur des Ames Scrupuleuses ou Craintives, par le R. P. Dupois, S.J.

Father Dupois' little book first appeared in 1897, and since then it has gone through sixteen editions. It has been examined and approved of by the Sacred Congregation of the Holy Office, and has, besides, the approbation of many bishops and theologians.

Father Doyle's version has been somewhat reduced in size, and some alterations in it made, and the booklet is now published in the hope that it may be an encouragement and a help to timid and scrupulous souls

General Considerations

Definition.

Scrupulosity, in general, is **an ill-founded fear of committing sin.**

There are **two kinds** of scruples: those which affect only the **intelligence**; those which affect also the **sensitive will**.

- Purely **intellectual** scruples are really only **doubts**. They are most frequently met with in straightforward souls, who exercise self-control and are not habitually scrupulous. As soon, therefore, as these souls become morally certain that the act in question is not sinful, the scruple vanishes. This kind of scruple is harmless, and needs no treatment.

- The contrary is the case with scruples which affect the inferior part of the soul (**sensitive will**). From the strong impression produced on the senses these draw a force which resists the mere statement of facts. Such scruples chiefly afflict impressionable souls; in fact, it is their emotional nature which engenders scrupulosity. A practical definition of this kind of scruple would be: an uneasy, ill-founded fear of committing sin, increased by the impressions made on the inferior part of the soul.

An **example** may help to make clearer these different kinds of scruples. Two persons leave the church on a Sunday morning, fearing that, owing to their many distractions, they have not complied with their obligation of hearing Mass. Having listened to their doubts, their confessor reassures both. However, one only is entirely satisfied. The other soon becomes troubled again, gets nervous, and feels an almost irresistible longing to be quite sure, either by fuller explanation or by hearing another Mass. The **first** of these persons had only an *intellectual* scruple, the harmless fear of a loyal soul; the **second** suffers from nervous fear, which stirs the *sensitive* part of the soul, and causes a real scruple.

Difficulty in the Treatment of Scruples,

A true scruple, being involuntary and spontaneous, **the cure** will consist, not in preventing it, as this is impossible, but **in despising it**.

But in this lies all the **difficulty**. How deluded is the scrupulous person who imagines himself "cured" when he has fully understood his director's decision, and realised the foolishness of his fears!

He fancies that it is quite easy to do what he now so "clearly" sees to be "the best." Yet it is only now that the real struggle will begin. For the first time he realises to what lengths the tyranny of his impressions leads him.

His feelings become so many *iron chains*; at every effort made by his confessor's orders, to get free, his hands and feet feel tied down by almost invincible bonds.

God will help him, but his **cure** will be complete only when, by dint of repeated victories, he will have acquired **the habit of conquering himself**.

God's Plan and the Devil's.

God, Who is wisdom and light, wishes man to be guided by his **intelligence**, and not by the blind feelings of his animal nature.

It is, therefore, very far from God's plan that man should regulate his conduct by **doubt**, which is the enemy of his intelligence. This is so far true, that even God's laws do not bind unless when clear and beyond doubt. The way to heaven is difficult enough for man, on account of the many real obligations which meet him almost at every step. What would it be if he were obliged, under pain of sin, to overcome the obstacle of a thousand doubtful obligations? Such an intolerable state of things would be quite unworthy of the divine wisdom and goodness.

The demon of scrupulosity wishes to upset this merciful design of Providence. In the guidance of man, he tries to replace certainty by doubt, reason by feeling. An angel of darkness himself, he plunges the scrupulous soul into the darkness of ignorance, and imposes on him, as his tyrannical guide, his own wretched doubts, and with fearful results.

Deadly Effects of Scrupulosity.

Scrupulosity completely deforms the judgment in moral matters. It takes away one's common sense.

It places before the eye of conscience **a magnifying glass**, which enlarges the slightest cause of alarm, and makes a **timid** soul see a thousand phantom sins, whilst by false reasoning it seeks to persuade it that these are undoubted faults.

Scrupulosity stops all progress in perfection.

It is a fundamental truth that we cannot love God unless we believe in His love for us. Scrupulosity completely **represses** such a belief, and thus **paralyzes** all generous effort.

At every moment it creates **trouble** between the soul and its Creator by pessimistic feelings about the past, and about its present dispositions and actions. The conclusions foolishly arrived at under the influence of these feelings boldly give the lie to the wise decisions of the confessor, and lead the soul to rebel against his spiritual guidance, and to put itself at the mercy of its enemy.

Soon the soul, seriously believing itself to be in a bad way, becomes **discouraged**, and often begins to commit real sin.

Even though sin does not follow from scruples, scrupulosity, nevertheless, retards the soul's progress in several other ways. It represents **prayer** as full of difficulties. It stops the ears of the poor downcast soul to the consoling voice of the Holy Ghost. It destroys **confidence**. **It prevents the frequentation of the Sacraments**, and thus stops their strengthening effects. It almost takes away the power of resisting **temptation**. It causes **discouragement**, and may even lead to **despair**

Treatment of Scrupulosity

The general rules for the treatment of scruples may be reduced to five: *prayer, vigilance, struggle against depression, obedience, generosity in self-conquest*. On the first three, little need be said; **obedience and generosity** in self-conquest constitute the **basis** of the treatment.

First Remedy: Prayer.

The precept laid down by our Lord Jesus Christ **to pray in temptation** is evidently applicable to scruples, which are a great danger even to salvation.

Satan would mock at our weakness in our fight with scruples, as Goliath mocked at David, unless we were armed by prayer with the very strength of God.

And so prayer, however dry and against the grain, is needed by the soul that is a prey to scruples.

"Watch ye and pray that ye enter not into temptation" (Matt. 26:41).

Second Remedy: Vigilance.

For a scrupulous soul, what is this holy vigilance recommended by Christ?

It is the **vigilance** of a soldier facing an enemy.

To sleep, to throw down one's arms, to neglect precautions, would be serious faults against this warlike vigilance prescribed by our Saviour.

How foolish, then, those who think to cure scrupulous souls by recommending them to have a good time of it, to put aside prayer, mortification of the senses, and all care of conscience!

Do they consider themselves wiser than Jesus Christ who thus dare to counsel the very opposite to His command?

Third Remedy: Struggle against Depression.

If there be anyone who feels the effects of sadness as described by the Wise Man: *"The sadness of a man consumes the heart"* (Prov. 25:20), it is the poor scrupulous soul.

And **sadness only increases scrupulosity**.

The scrupulous, therefore, will do well to have recourse with moderation to innocent amusements. And try to occupy their mind with pleasant thoughts.

Above all, such people should strive to keep themselves **usefully employed**. This is the best antidote to trouble of mind.

Does not a trouble, of which we think ten times less, owing to our occupations, become in consequence ten times lighter?

No one can pity those who brood over their worries, neglecting the duties of their state, which, whilst giving them necessary distraction, would sanctify their lives and save them much suffering.

Fourth Remedy: Obedience.

The two general remedies that yet remain to be discussed, obedience and generosity in self-conquest, are by far **the most important**.

Without **perfect, trustful and blind obedience** to an experienced confessor there can be no cure for scrupulosity.

This obedience should consist of two things: **obedience of action**, which carries out exactly all that the director prescribes; and **obedience of the intelligence**, which believes all that is ordered to be believed.

- **Obedience of action** has for its object the putting into **practice** the freedom of conscience ordered by the director. To ensure complete cure, this **freedom** must be fully practised, the least holding back would spoil much, if not everything, since by so acting the scrupulous person would show that he either forgets, or does not believe, that it is God Whom he obeys. Although obedience to one's confessor is necessary for all, it is **more indispensable** for the scrupulous than for any other.

There are several reasons for this.

1. **First** of all, because scrupulosity, by affecting the head, takes away one's **common sense** in matters of conscience. Providence gave the soul common sense as a guide, and now that this is lost, a substitute is sent in the person of the **director**, a sympathetic and blessed guide, clothed with **divine authority**, having received a heavenly commission by the words: "*He that hears you, hears Me*" (Luke 10:16).

2. Not only does scrupulosity deprive man of the enlightened guide given him by his Creator, but at every step it leads him astray in a **labyrinth of doubt**.

For this reason also obedience is an indispensable guide. For what else can rescue him from this dreadful **confusion**? Again, when a plant is bent to the ground by the wind, a prop is necessary in order to strengthen it little by little until it is strong enough to withstand the storm. This is the part of a wise director. Not only does he help the soul in every storm, but **he teaches** it little by little to do **without** his aid, a result, however, that will be obtained only by an entire and courageous obedience.

- But obedience of action must be accompanied and elevated by **obedience of the understanding**.

For of what value, before God, is the servile obedience of the body, if the soul remains in revolt and persists in opposing its own false ideas to those of truth itself? Towards this more noble obedience the efforts of all enlightened directors tend.

In the malady of scruples, the **demon**, by insinuating wrong ideas, leads his unfortunate victim where he wills. Therefore these ideas must be **rectified**. They have gradually, under Satan's influence, passed from being mere *wrong ideas*, through the stage of *wrong impressions*, on to that of **unshaken convictions**, and finally have become **rules of conduct**, over which obedience alone can have any power.

It is these **errors of the intellect** which keep the poor soul away from the Sacraments, and cause it to be guilty of foolish extravagances.

But what, it may be asked, are these *wrong ideas*? The answer can be given in a word: *all those by the confessor so considered*. Those most generally met with are: *"My confessions were bad. My confessor does not understand me, he is mistaken in me, not believing that I could be so wicked. I have never had contrition. I am constantly committing sins against faith, against purity. I blaspheme interiorly. I rash judge, even priests. The oftener I receive Holy Communion, the worse I become," etc. etc.*

Wrong ideas like these must be given no quarter. It is God Who commands them **to be exterminated** without mercy, as of old He commanded Saul to destroy the Amalecites, not even sparing Agag, the king. That is to say, the scrupulous soul **must abandon any opinion contrary to that of the director**.

But once rejected, are such opinions done with? By no means.

The Amalecites may feign death, and a guard must be set over apparently dead bodies that may seek to rise again. Above all, there must be a watch for *traitors*, who may have escaped the carnage, and remain closely concealed in some fold of the obstinate understanding.

How may these be discovered? **A little watchfulness** suffices to detect them. Their presence betrays itself by an equivocation, by an embarrassed silence, or by a want of progress.

To the question. *"Do you still believe in such or such a theological truth, in such or such a way of looking at your conscience, upon which we were agreed some time ago?"* a negative or hesitating answer will be given, or they will say *"I dare not act on it."* Is not the clinging to one's own opinion at once revealed? Are not the Amalecites discovered?

To sum up this twofold obedience, which is the fourth general remedy of scrupulosity, the scrupulous soul must give the confessor **unlimited obedience** by believing in, as well as acting on, his decisions and directions.

Like St. Peter, this soul has the happiness of listening to Jesus Christ Himself. He is sure that it is really Our Lord Who commands him to walk boldly on the waters by despising foolish fears. Ought he not then to obey the call by casting himself into the sea as the intrepid Apostle did?

Fifth Remedy: Generosity in Self-conquest.

Self-conquest consists in **persevering acts of self-denial**.

Vain fears, silly imaginations, all the turmoil and confusion that uncontrolled scrupulosity engenders in the soul, must be resolutely met and opposed at every step. This victory over foolish impressions is also the victory over scrupulosity.

But this victory costs much to *cowardly* and *sensual* souls; indeed, at first it seems to them *impossible*.

On the other hand, it is **easy** to souls accustomed to self-denial. St. Aloysius Gonzaga was a striking example of this. Although his conscience was so delicate that he was unusually exposed to the danger of scrupulosity, his **heroic mortification** had become so habitual and rendered him so docile to his director, that once a thing was shown to be a scruple, it was conquered on the spot. Less heroic and mortified souls will, of course, have greater difficulty in winning a victory. Yet **let them not despair**.

The mountain of difficulties will disappear before **perseverance**. It is in the nature of impressions to become less vivid, to weaken, when despised, and perseverance in generously ignoring them, and driving them away will make them, in a little time, **vanish completely**.

Particular Remedies.

Besides these general remedies for the cure of scrupulosity thus briefly described, there are some **particular and practical rules** to be followed, which will be found of great use in freeing the scrupulous soul from its malady. These will now be set out in order.

1. Doubts must be Ignored.

The scrupulous soul must **take no notice of his doubts**, that is to say, he must regard as absolutely **null and void** all doubtful laws, prohibitions or obligations, or any fear of sin, if the motive of the fear be doubtful.

More than this. He must consider as doubtful, and consequently as not binding, all laws, obligations, or fears of having sinned, which are not absolute certainties, i.e., as self-evident as that two and two make four.

Again, **in confession**, such a soul must consider himself **free to accuse or not accuse himself of mortal sin in any way doubtful**.

In the same manner he must **not** impose on himself, as an obligation, the accusation of mortal sins perhaps **already confessed**. On the contrary, he should boldly set his face against such a confession.

Furthermore, **he must abstain from making a confession over again**, which, perhaps, was *good*, or perhaps *bad*, **whatever reason** he may have to doubt of its being all right. Let him have no uneasiness in acting thus, since the obligation of making these **doubtful** confessions over again is in itself **doubtful**, and consequently **not binding**.

2. Belief in the Easiness of Forgiveness.

The scrupulous soul must believe that all his sins are forgiven **immediately** each time he makes an act of **perfect contrition**, or receives **absolution, even with imperfect contrition**.

"But," it may be asked, *"how am I to be sure that I have this contrition?"*

The scrupulous may believe they have the necessary contrition when the act of contrition is made with **sincerity**. This sincerity is assured when the firm purpose of never sinning again mortally is itself **sincere or free from deceit**.

God so desires the conversion of sinners that He reduces to a **minimum** the conditions necessary for pardon.

He asks **only the most ordinary good will**, that is to say, the simplest firm purpose of not sinning mortally.

3. Presuming Decisions.

When the scrupulous are troubled as to how they should act, they may always **presume** on the reply which their director probably would give, and they should at once put into practice any relaxation that their director would probably permit.

This "probably" should be **sufficient** for them; because it is **God** Who, through their confessor, ordains that they should be satisfied, and He will answer for it all.

In reality, the trouble of these souls, and their uncertainty as to their director's reply, are **merely doubts**, and these, as has been seen, are to be put aside and done with at once, **by taking the broader path**.

4. Lenient View of One's Faults.

It is of the greatest importance that the scrupulous should **not exaggerate their faults**, either to themselves or to their director.

The reason for this is obvious. **Scrupulosity chiefly consists in seeing sin where there is none, or in exaggerating the malice of actions scarcely reprehensible.**

The imagination sees through a powerful *magnifying glass*. The judgment becomes more and more **deformed**, until the poor soul comes to *calumniate* itself, telling lies about itself under pretext of greater security.

Experience shows that the way in which the scrupulous **exaggerate** their faults to their confessor under pretext of *greater security* soon becomes the way in which they look at themselves.

One wrong figure will upset a whole calculation; a false weight will not give correct results; but in this case it is *worse* still, it is the *balance* itself of the judgment that is rendered useless.

From this exaggeration of faults follows **another and a worse evil**.

The director is completely handicapped.

How could even the most skilful doctor cure a patient of whose state he constantly receives false reports?

Is it not tempting God for the scrupulous thus to seek to be guided by Him in the person of His minister, whilst they use every means to deceive the latter?

By exaggerating their faults, scrupulous persons run the risk of receiving from their confessor discouraging replies, and decisions which are over severe, and which will be to them as so much *poison*. Denying steadily that the most efficacious

remedies prescribed produce any fruit whatever, they will end by causing their director to *despair* of their cure and by being abandoned by him.

The scrupulous should lessen rather than exaggerate their failings. In this way, little by little, they will come to see them as they are, and the scales of the *balance* will be set right. Thus, in speaking of their troubles *outside* confession, they should be on their guard against over-emphasising certain circumstances, which might make their case **worse** than it really is; and *in their sacramental accusation* let them **not fear to extenuate rather than exaggerate**. For why should they fear, when God Himself, by the mouth of their director, wishes them to act thus?

5. Promptitude in Acting on Decisions.

How many scrupulous people there are who have **a mania for seeking advice**, who make the confessor repeat the same thing *a hundred times*, but who take very little trouble to put his answers into **practice**?

It is necessary, therefore, that the scrupulous **act at once on the decisions of their confessor**.

Something postponed is something not done. Unless they act **at once**, they forget what has been said, or only imperfectly remember it, or else it becomes a dead letter by delay.

It may even happen that if later they decide to obey, they may no longer be able **to recall** what exactly has been said, and scruples will arise, and they will not dare to act.

6. Broad-minded Interpretation of Advice.

Scrupulous persons should take care, when acting under obedience, to **interpret the advice of their confessor in the broadest sense**.

The demon will try to make the path *narrow*. God bids them **widen** it.

When they are in doubt as to whether the decisions of their confessor apply to such or such a particular case, or if it might be understood in such or such a sense, let them take **the broader way**.

These reservations in obedience—doing only by halves what their confessor ordains, or interpreting his orders in their narrowest sense—come from **a want of faith and courage** in conquering foolish fancies.

Why should one fear to act freely when it is God Who commands?

7. Not to Pile up Questions.

Scrupulous souls should **avoid** filling their memory (or their notes) with question upon question to put to their director.

On the contrary, **the wise course is to try to forget doubts and worries** as soon as they arise.

The effort made to remember all these troubles will only serve to root them more firmly. **New difficulties** will spring from the old ones, and, even whilst seeking

advice, the fear of *forgetting something* so preoccupies the mind as to diminish the **attention** paid to the confessor.

How much of this worry would vanish like smoke, if only scrupulous souls would not keep it alive by **useless dwelling** upon it !

Confession

As **the Sacrament of Penance is the great cure for scrupulosity**, it is also the chief object of attack by the enemy.

To meet these attacks the following points must be clearly grasped and kept in mind.

The **first** trouble that oftentimes is suggested by the devil with regard to confession is this: **have past confessions been good? Ought they not to be made over again?**

How far back should one examine and confess.

The answer is easy.

Without either reflection or hesitation, the scrupulous soul must at once answer firmly: **my past confessions were good.**

There is only **one exception** to this: when some past confession, **clearly and before all examination**, is seen to be bad, and this for reasons as **clear** as that two and two make four.

But, it may be objected, suppose these confessions, about which uneasiness is felt, should really have been *bad*?

It does not matter very much. These bad confessions **will be forgiven in the confession now about to be made**, provided there is sorrow for all sins committed, known and unknown.

Therefore, let the scrupulous soul obey **God, Who, in the person of the confessor**, forbids these former confessions to be repeated, and **Who takes everything on Himself.**

Examination of Conscience before Confession.

To a scrupulous soul examination of conscience is a perfect *anthill* of **anxieties** and a real **torture**.

This is true, whether the scrupulous soul is innocent, or has contracted habits of grievous sin, before which last is by no means rare. For the devil can mingle scruples with grave matter, while **littleness of mind**, joined to **a timid and impressionable character**, which is the source of scrupulosity, does not exclude vicious inclinations. In both cases **the examination of conscience should be as simple as possible**

For the good scrupulous soul, **a rapid glance** over the past, since the last confession, will be sufficient and best. If grievous sin has, in the interval, been committed, it will thus be **immediately perceived**.

This done, the obligatory examination ends, as the obligation extends to **mortal sins alone**. The confessor may, indeed, allow two or three minutes extra for the

examination of venial or doubtful mortal sins, but the penitent must promise the confessor that he considers this a work of supererogation and **in no wise of obligation**. 11

But how is this examination to be **simplified** for the scrupulous sinner, that is to say, for one who falls more or less often into mortal sin? Briefly as follows.

Having first ascertained the kind of mortal sin or sins into which the penitent usually falls, the confessor will bid him consider this **class or classes of sin** for a few seconds, and to decide at once the **probable number of times** these mortal sins have certainly been committed. As has been said, this rapid glance is, for such a soul, the surest intuition of the **truth**, and the one least subject to perplexities.

After this rapid examination on each of the habitual mortal sins, the confessor will allow his scrupulous penitent to examine for a moment as to whether he may have fallen into any other certainly grievous sins. This done, the examination of obligation is finished.

If a few minutes be added for examination of *venial* sins, it would be well, but this is **by no means of obligation**.

Contrition.

There is no forgiveness of sin without sorrow for sin.

This sorrow is of two kinds: **perfect contrition**, which is sorrow for having offended God because He is so good in Himself; **simple contrition or attrition**, which arises from some *less perfect motive* than the love of God, such as the fear of hell, the loss of heaven, etc.

Perfect contrition is not necessary for the Sacrament of Penance. An act of **attrition** is sufficient.

As the following questions relating to sorrow for sin often trouble scrupulous souls, they will be here briefly answered.

1. Is it necessary to feel sorrow?

The act of contrition is **an act of the will resolved not to sin mortally**. It in no way consists, therefore, either in *affectionate regret* or in *tender feelings* in the **sensitive** part of the soul. A dry, but **firm and sincere** act of the will is all that is necessary for contrition.

2. Is it necessary to have the firm purpose of avoiding all venial sin ?

No attention to venial sin is necessary for contrition. Strictly speaking, every mortal sin might be forgiven without the pardon of a single venial sin. To obtain pardon of venial sin there must, of course, be sorrow for them, but venial sins for which we have either contrition or attrition may be forgiven without pardon being granted for those for which we have no sorrow.

3. Should the act of contrition apply to each modal sin in particular?

No; any act of contrition embracing **all** one's mortal sins taken **together** is sufficient.

4. Can contrition be sincere when one is certain of falling back again into particular modal sins?

However great our weakness or the force of temptation, **we are never absolutely certain of falling back into mortal sin**. On the contrary, faith teaches that we shall always have grace sufficient to resist, if we so will.

But no matter *how sure* we may feel that we shall fall back again into sin, our actual sorrow is none the less **good**, provided that at the present moment our purpose of amendment is sincere. If we are prepared *here and now* never to commit mortal sin, our will is right, and anything that comes later to turn it in the wrong direction does not interfere with its present proper disposition.

5. When should the act of contrition be made?

The penitent should make his act of contrition **during his preparation** for confession, since at the moment of absolution a scrupulous soul is usually so troubled that the act of sorrow is not made attentively.

Accusation.

The accusation must be made **short**, for it is here that fancies and scruples are apt to multiply.

The rule of despising doubts must be applied in a broad-minded manner, the confessor imposing **brevery**, obeyed, and the longing for a fuller accusation in order to secure greater security mortified. Let the penitent accuse himself honestly, and tell everything **simply** as it appears in the mind. Let him not go back on what has been said, even if it is perceived that inadvertently the exact truth has not been told.

According to the **Council of Trent** and the surest theology, **one is only obliged to confess sins which one is certain are mortal**, that is to say, the grave guilt of which is as certain as it is that two and two make four.

Sins, mortal in themselves, but which are committed in doubt, are not necessary matter for confession.

In the same way sins clearly mortal and clearly committed, but probably **already** confessed, **need not be mentioned**.

Finally, one is **not** obliged to confess any **aggravating circumstances**, no matter how great, **unless it change the nature of the sin**.

Absolution.

May a scrupulous soul refuse absolution? Nothing is more *diabolical* in a scrupulous soul than the refusal of absolution.

Absolution is consented to at times, but on condition that the confessor allow this or that *caprice*. It is thus the **demon** becomes the "judge" of this most necessary

sacrament, for is it not he who excites the imagination of the poor soul, and fills it with terror?

He attaches tremendous importance to this prerogative of judge of absolution which is so foolishly given him, because it gives him a ready means of entangling the scrupulous soul still more hopelessly in his nets, besides **depriving it of pardon and grace**.

Why should absolution be feared when God, by the mouth of His priest, commands its reception, when He asserts its validity, when He takes all the responsibility, and declares that to refuse it is contrary to common sense?

After Confession.

A victory is changed into defeat if, by a skilful manoeuvre, the opposing general should succeed in leading the victorious troops to imagine the battle *lost*.

This is what often happens to the scrupulous soul after a really good confession. **It is lost if it lend an ear to Satan**, who will try to transform into a sacrilege the excellent confession made. In fact, leaving the confessional is for the scrupulous soul like walking into an *ambush* where the enemy lies waiting.

The preparation for confession, the examination of conscience, the accusation, the words exchanged with the confessor, the contrition, the absolution, in short, **everything** which goes to make up the sacrament becomes a flock of scruples, which Satan stirs into dangerous activity at the least examination imprudently made.

There is no **foolish longing** the evil one does not excite, no **false motive** he does not suggest, in order to lead the poor soul to examine into the confession just made.

A decisive battle is then fought. If the soul remains **in peace** and decides that his confession was good, **he is saved**; an absolution received and believed valid through obedience is a long step towards the overthrow of scrupulosity.

If, on the contrary, the confession is condemned as "invalid", or at least if the poor soul remain tormented by the thought of sacrilege, the evil will become **worse**; he will fall into **despair**, because in his eyes the only efficacious remedy for his trouble, which is confession, has been changed into poison.

Consequently, on leaving the confessional, let the scrupulous soul observe the two following directions:

1. To refrain from any examination under any pretext whatsoever, either as to the confession itself, or any of its accompanying acts, such as preparation, contrition, etc.

2. In spite of the "gravest reasons" he may have for suspecting the validity of his confession, contrition, etc., once he is not as **evidently certain** as he is that two and two make four, that this sacrament was unworthily received, he must boldly decide, and this *without* examination, that **his confession was entirely good in spite of contrary impressions**.

Cure of Scruples by Receiving Holy Communion

When there is question of levelling a newly mode road, the coarse stones are crushed by a *steamroller*.

Such a levelling or crushing in the case of a scrupulous soul is best accomplished by **frequent Communion**.

Because **each Communion means a definite victory over a scrupulous disposition** disposed to throw a thousand difficulties in the way; it means a **casting aside of vain fears**, a gain in **trust and confidence** in God, a **strengthening of the will** in whose proper use complete victory must finally lie.

Again, the repeated reception of the Blessed Eucharist by scrupulous souls produces **other** good effects. It gives **joy to the heart**, and a delightful consciousness of its **union with God**. This does away with sadness and the false impression that the soul is not right with its Creator, an impression, which scruples frequently produce.

Lastly, the facility with which Holy Communion is often received is the surest and most consoling sign that scrupulosity is killed **forever**.

The scrupulous soul, therefore, should receive Holy Communion as often as his confessor directs. Let him obey *blindly*, treading under foot all uneasiness and uncertainty, however great it may be, of having perhaps sinned mortally since absolution. He must go to the altar rails after making a simple act of contrition, as he has been ordered, without seeking any other confessor. The promptitude of his cure and a **delightful peace** will soon be the reward of his obedience.

Storm the Forerunner of Lasting Balm

The scrupulous are nearly always inclined to **discouragement**, and even to **despair**, in the course of the treatment just explained.

"I have been promised solid peace," they say, *"as the reward of this painful treatment, but instead of calm it has greatly increased my disquiet of soul."*

They speak quite truly. The **uneasiness and trouble** of soul they complain of are inevitable in the beginning of the treatment, and even when it is almost ended. But **these storms foretell a lasting calm** which will soon follow. A little thought will convince of this, besides explaining the painful process through which the scrupulous soul is passing to peace.

All the treatment to be undergone by the scrupulous person is of a nature to produce **at first great agitation**. How could it be otherwise? How could the supports, on which his sickly security leant since childhood, be cut away without pain? How could he renounce everything that brought peace, such as it was, without feeling it intensely; for instance, exaggerating faults, repeating the same accusations, keeping away from Holy Communion for greater security, etc.?

Besides, **Satan** is on the watch to make sin of, to turn into horrible acts, the most lawful liberties. The devil knows that all is now **at stake**; he is conscious that his victim is slipping from his grasp. Feeling that his long *tyranny* over this poor soul is about to cease, seeing himself driven from a house where he was master so long, is it wonderful that he should shake it to its very foundations, just as he shakes and convulses the body of a possessed person out of which he is driven by an exorcism?

In almost every undertaking, be it human or supernatural, we must, according to the words of the Psalmist: "*Sow in tears to reap in joy*" (Ps. 125:5).

And St. Paul says: "*Now all chastisement for the present indeed seems not to bring with it joy but sorrow; but afterwards it will yield to them that are exercised by it the most peaceful fruit of justice*" (Heb. 12:2).

The first effect of a serious operation is an increase of pain and discomfort. Now, the treatment of scrupulosity is equivalent to a series of painful *amputations*. It lops off one by one those foolish safeguards with which the scrupulous soul had surrounded itself, and which had become a kind of *second nature* to it. Small wonder, therefore, that pain and distress should result.

Yet this suffering which is experienced is the very best sign that the evil malady is being **removed** and that a cure is being effected.

Consequently, instead of losing courage, the penitent should only **redouble both efforts and confidence**, assured that the treatment is producing lasting effects, effects foreseen and foretold by those who understand the spiritual life.

A Favourite Stratagem of the Evil One

Sometimes scrupulous souls have temptations which the devil uses to trouble **timorous** consciences, to distract them in prayer, to keep them back at every step; above all, to crush them by the multiplicity of small worries, and so render their lives impossible.

Among these *temptations* are **thoughts of blasphemy, despising holy things, desire for the profanation of sacred objects**, and even of the Sacred Host, **joy in the sorrow of others, wishing the death of others, doubts against faith, evil intentions** in innocent actions, **evil thoughts** about persons to whom one speaks, finally, **temptations against the holy purity** in souls that hold such things in horror.

These diabolical temptations, though **harmless** since there is no likelihood of their being consented to, nevertheless, **hide**, when frequent, **a dangerous trick**.

For woe to the soul that sets about examining and analysing these suggestions! That is what the devil desires.

Because this **imprudent examination** will increase and multiply the temptations, will lead the soul into a maze of doubts and perplexities, from which every effort to extricate itself will only entangle it more hopelessly.

The sacraments will become impossible, piety intolerable, and in the end conscience will become wholly unstrung, and **despair** will be the result.

Warned, therefore, by his confessor, of the insidiousness and danger of these temptations, yet assured of their harmlessness if rightly handled, the scrupulous penitent should put them from him at once with **quiet scorn**, and **on no pretext whatsoever must he stop to examine them or recall them** when once put away.

Four Complications of Scrupulosity.

Scrupulosity may become complicated in various ways, a fact which render cure **very difficult**.

The complications most often met with are the four following, each of which requires patient and careful treatment.

First Complication: Obstinacy.

The first and most dangerous complication of scrupulosity is **obstinacy**, and the refusal to obey the confessor, above all, when this goes so far as absolutely to refuse to receive the Sacraments.

As a scrupulous soul can only be cured by **obedience** to his confessor, there is little hope for him, if, instead of following the **director** God has given him, he prefers as guides **the demon of scrupulosity and the demon of disobedience**, both of whom will lead him to destruction

"Despair," says the Holy Spirit, *"of the man who is wise in his own eyes"* (Prov.). Is there not much more reason to despair when this so-called "wise" man is the very *blindest* of the blind, as are scrupulous souls, and yet refuses obstinately to take the hand of the only guide who can save him from the abyss?

The best advice to give such a one is to bid him meditate with faith on each of the two parts of the Gospel sentence: *"He that heareth you, heareth Me, and he that despiseth you, despiseth Me"* (Luke 10:16). Can he doubt that these words spoken by our Lord to His apostles, apply to priests, heirs to their authority over the penitent? He should also ponder on that other saying of the Saviour: *"Unless you become as little children (by your docility), you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven"* (Matt. 18:3).

With these poor obstinate souls, **the confessor must exhaust every resource** of his priestly charity, knowing there is question here of saving a soul from utter ruin.

But he will be able to gain nothing with **unreasonable minds** in moments of excitement, which with them are really **crisis of madness**. All that can then be obtained by zeal is that they may return in better dispositions.

Second Complication: Mortal Sins mingled with Scruples.

As has been said, **mortal sin** may not uncommonly be found to accompany and mingle with scruples. They may *mingle* even in the most varied proportions. This occurs sometimes to such an extent that the confessor asks himself whether he should devote himself most to the cure of **scruples** or to the eradication of **evil habits**.

In dealing with scrupulous sinners the confessor must proceed with great caution. He will, first of all, assure himself that **mortal sin** has been committed, which is not lightly to be admitted in a scrupulous soul, but **only after palpable and certain proof**.

Next he will endeavour, as speedily as possible, to arrive at **the number and species** of these grave sins, so as to limit the evil, that is to say, to reduce their number and kind to a minimum, in his own mind first of all, and then in the mind of the penitent.

It is of the utmost importance that this scrupulous sinner should regard as mortal only this minimum of grave sins. To secure this **the confessor will oblige him to**

disregard doubtful mortal sins. He will tell him there is no danger in acting thus, since even if these doubtful sins were really mortal, they would be effaced by **contrition and the Sacraments.**

To prevent any uneasiness, the confessor should, of his own accord, assure the penitent that he regards the serious sins confessed as really mortal, but that in spite of these grave sins he maintains that his penitent is *scrupulous*, and that the treatment laid down is necessary.

Third Complication: Repetition of Explanations.

The confessor will have less hesitation in continuing the treatment, as scrupulous sinners are, as a rule, the most **timid** in making use of the liberties permitted them.

If there is one class of scrupulous souls more dreaded by directors than any other it is those who are constantly going back on explanations given, or decisions received, because they appear faulty in their eyes.

A penitent who belongs to this class has one thing to recall, and one thing to do: it is **his duty to obey the confessor without adding a single word**, once the latter, having listened to the reasons given in favour of repetition, or even when not wishing to hear anything, maintains his previous decision.

It is God Who then declares through His minister that He takes everything on Himself. It is He Who bids the penitent to obey in silence. What, therefore, need he fear?

Fourth Complication: Incurable State.

The fourth complication of scrupulosity is that which results from the **advanced age** or **defective intelligence** of the penitent, or from a persistent **cowardice** which shrinks from applying the treatment.

When one or the other of these obstacles is met with, the complete cure of scrupulosity is **almost impossible.**

All that the director can do is to consider how much of the treatment can be prudently attempted. Usually it will be best to try only to lessen the malady and prescribe palliations, above all, when it is perceived that a full and complete treatment will only upset still further a diseased mind, or an old person, whose deeply ingrained habits and notions are unalterable.

Scrupulous and Dangerous Acts of Virtue

It is no uncommon plan of the demon of scrupulosity to so twist and distort even most praiseworthy acts as to take away liberty in their performance, and to impose as **obligatory** an act that is purely **voluntary.**

A few examples will explain what is meant.

A person, having deprived himself several times, in a spirit of penance, of sugar in his tea or coffee, feels uneasy if he afterwards takes sugar, believing himself "guilty" of sensuality and infidelity to grace.

Meeting in the street several persons of the opposite sex, the sight of whom might cause me trouble, I have for a long time past imposed on myself the act of self-denial of not looking at them. Now, although my confessor assures me that I may look at them deliberately without shadow of sin, I am afraid to do so, and would believe myself "guilty" of any evil thoughts that might arise from so doing.

In these and a thousand other instances, the **devil** endeavours to steal away **liberty of action**, and **to impose an obligation where there is none**. He presents to the scrupulous soul a puzzling *dilemma*.

If one acts against one's foolish fears and asserts **liberty of action**, one omits what is *more perfect*, nay, what seems to be alone allowed.

On the other hand, if one submits to the yoke of **scrupulosity**, many things generally allowed would have to be omitted, and liberty would be ever increasingly restricted.

What course, then, should be taken?

The most experienced masters of the spiritual life, when confronted with a case of this kind, give the following advice, the wisdom of which will be appreciated each time it is followed.

The penitent should **enquire** of his director, if it is not self-evident, whether the act in question is sinful or not. If assured that it is quite lawful, he should resolve:

1. To perform the act about which he is troubled, six, seven or eight times, or as often as may be necessary to acquire the habit of acting **freely and stifling foolish remorse**.

2. Afterwards **to deny himself**, by doing what is more perfect, but with the knowledge that the opposite way of acting would cause no uneasiness or scruples.

Without such a resolution, resolutely and perseveringly carried out, the poor anxious soul will remain caught in this dilemma of the devil as in a vice, which tightens more and more. For once the soul allows itself to be thus entrapped, the devil will multiply trouble on trouble, and fill the most indispensable actions with **perplexities and difficulties**.

On the other hand, as experience teaches, once these acts of mortification are done freely under obedience, they are done **joyfully and with ease**, the spirit of God and the spirit of liberty going always hand in hand.

Obedience to the demon is hard; obedience to God is a pleasure.

It may be asked **whence** arises this dangerous complication of scrupulosity?

It comes from the **timidity** which does not allow the soul to be content with the perfect security given by the confessor's assurance or by common sense, both of which declare that the action in question may be performed without even the shadow of sin. The soul is troubled because it seeks "a greater security" than Providence wishes to grant, that is to say, the security given by reason or the reply of the confessor.

Scruples regarding Holy Purity

As the scruples of pious persons are often concerned with the virtue of purity, many may find it useful and consoling to recall the following.

Mortal Sin not Probable.

In order that a **mortal sin** against purity be committed, it is necessary (as for every mortal sin) that there be at the time and at the same moment **full consent and full actual attention to the grave malice of the thought, word or action.**

In other words, in order to sin mortally, there must be **perfect knowledge and full consent**, the one clearly perceiving, the other fully accepting, the grave sin.

Besides this **it is necessary that both acts be simultaneous.**

Is this what happens in the thoughts or liberties of pious souls against the angelic virtue? Certainly not.

Nearly always **they do not realise they are doing wrong**; they completely forget their thought or act is sinful, even though a moment before they may have clearly perceived its malice.

In all such cases **they do not commit sin**, since they are not conscious of wrong while thinking or acting. Or they only see the malice of their thought or act **in a confused way**, and though there may be full consent of will, the fault is no more than venial, since the knowledge of the wrong is imperfect.

Two Principles of Security.

Should souls that have been tempted against purity examine whether they have consented?

They must not think of doing so.

These examinations are **imprudent and dangerous**, their only result being to upset one's peace of mind, or bring back the temptation with renewed force.

Besides they are quite **unnecessary**, because a scrupulous soul may take for rule the two following principles.

Firstly, every time mortal sin is committed, the soul knows it clearly before any examination.

Secondly, on the other hand, the soul is certain that mortal sin has not been committed when there is any doubt on the matter.

But, it may be objected, if unhappily in these temptations consent has been given either mortally or venially, is not examination *necessary* for accusation?

No; such examination is neither necessary nor useful; it is even **very dangerous**, as has been said, since it is likely **to renew the temptation.**

According to the first principle laid down, it is certain that **no mortal sin** has been committed, since there is no certainty of it before examination.

Besides, even if mortal sin was committed (which is not admitted), or a venial sin, these mortal and venial sins would be blotted out either by the first act of **sincere sorrow** made, or **by the first absolution received.**

Bold Affirmation of Victory.

The scrupulous soul struggling with the demon of impurity may, relying on the principles of security given above, constantly affirm that it has been **victorious**.

This should be done **often and boldly**. To do so is of importance for the continuation of victory. For nothing gives such spirit and generosity in the struggle as the secret confidence that one is faithful and united to God.

On the other hand, the soul becomes discouraged if it believes, even wrongfully, that it has sinned mortally.

It is then that it will give in to the temptation and verify the well-known axiom: "A battle believed to be lost, is a lost battle."

Cut down Examination and Accusation.

Examination and accusation of sins against purity should be reduced to a **minimum**.

Without previous examination, it will be enough for the scrupulous soul, which has been tempted against the holy virtue, to say to the confessor: "*Father, I have been tempted against the virtue of purity, will you kindly question me?*"

An experienced and prudent confessor will at once understand the case after a question or two, and will probably forbid the penitent to examine or accuse himself further in detail, but to be content with a general accusation.

Care of Health.

As **ill-health or want of certain bodily precautions** are oftentimes the source of temptations against purity, the confessor will at times be able to give advice or suggest remedies that will lessen or completely remove the temptation.

Theologians agree that those private attentions necessary to health often *recommended by doctors* are allowable, and are in no way an occasion of mortal sin.

It is, therefore, certain the confessor will not forbid them, especially to scrupulous souls.

On their side, penitents should **disregard or despise** any temptation that may arise in the performance of these lawful actions.

Utility of these Temptations.

Instead of being discouraged, souls strongly tempted against holy purity should look on themselves as **highly privileged**.

It is a truth of Christianity that God only permits trials for our greater good.

The Holy Spirit assures us of this by the mouth of St. Paul: "*To them that love God all things (even the vilest temptations) work together unto good*" (Rom. 8:28).

This great Apostle, who, in spite of his high sanctity, bore the assaults of the impure spirit, received as consolation from the Holy Spirit these words: "*Power (chastity) is made perfect in infirmity (temptation)*" (2 Cor. 12:9).

That is why he boldly adds: "*Gladly, therefore, will I glory in my infirmities (temptations), that the power (chastity) of Christ may dwell in me.*"

Doubtful Security: Unshaken Security

To sum up all that has been said, the scrupulous soul has the choice of two certainties: the one precarious and unstable, the other unshaken and even divine, since it is God Himself Who is its author and guarantees its solidity.

The **first** is that deceitful security, which the scrupulous soul seeks, by always taking what he considers the surest side, but in reality by obeying his foolish fears and the demon of scrupulosity, which lead him into continual and even greater difficulties.

The **second** security is that which comes from heaven through his confessor. By following the advice of his director, the scrupulous soul is absolutely sure of not committing sin, because he is certain of thus being guided like a little child by the hand of God, which is one with that of the hand of his confessor. This security is so complete and absolute, that even if the director should be deceived, the obedient soul would still be secure, because even in this case it is God Who is obeyed. It is He Who commands obedience in spite of doubts and fears, and takes upon Himself all the responsibility.

There is no greater security of conscience than obedience to one's confessor, joined to the secret assurance of conscience, attesting that one's contrition is sincere. And this contrition, as already explained, is nothing more than the sincere will of never sinning mortally again.

This security, **founded on obedience and true sorrow**, is that with which God ordains that man should be content. It is a reasonable security, theologically accurate, truly divine. It is the supreme security. To wish for any other greater would be to seek the impossible, and to cast oneself into the abyss. ■
