

# SCRUPLES

## AND HOW TO OVERCOME THEM

The cause of over scrupulousness  
and its remedy.

The way to interior peace.

### Contents

Scruples.....	9
The Causes of Scruples.....	23
The Baneful Effects of Scruples.....	37
The Remedy for Scruples.....	49
Interior peace.....	61

### I

#### Scruples

1.

Over scrupulosity is such a widespread and pernicious spiritual ailment that we feel its treatment calls for a detailed treatise, although some readers may wonder why we should attach such importance to what seems to them a mental affliction of weaklings. No such criticism will be made by priests, on whom devolve the duties of spiritual directors, by doctors, concerned with the treatment of nervous maladies and, least of all, by those who, either as a result of their professional duties or of their own unhappy experience, are in a position to assess the gravity of the problem. All such people will be grateful to us for offering them *an easy and simple method for the overcoming of scruples*.

2.

The over scrupulous are often cruelly misjudged and condemned as social misfits, unbalanced to the point of obsession or as cases on the borderline of insanity. Such judgement is not only harsh, but it is unmerited by the facts. Scruples attack not merely the weakling and the person of low intelligence; on the contrary, even the greatest minds are liable to be attacked. As a case in point we might cite the experience of one of the greatest theologians of the eighteenth century – St Alphonsus Ligouri. St Alphonsus had been hailed as a Doctor of the Church, but in his old age he fell victim to attacks of over scrupulousness which lasted for months at a time. The man who during his long career had solved so many difficult spiritual problems for others, and who had brought peace to so many troubled souls, found the peace of his own conscience sorely troubled; and wondered with anguish if he was not to suffer endless torment at the hands of Divine Justice. The saint fell into a state of pitiable spiritual distress that became a heartbreak to his friends. In the end he cured himself and triumphed over his malady by the use of the one certain remedy for such cases – unquestioning obedience to his confessor's directions. It will be seen therefore that it is not alone the feeble in spirit who suffer from scruples and that in certain cases the suffering can become acute to the point of martyrdom. Such suffering is to be respected; springing as it does from spiritual causes a high moral order. We pity all those in pain, even if the pain is due to the sufferer's own fault; why then refuse pity to the victim of scruples, who is in no sense the author of his own malady?

3.

Scruples have been defined as *an unreasonable fear of sin, producing spiritual anguish*. This anguish affects the mind, making it see evil where in reality no evil exists, and the conscience, which is troubled by uncertainty. There is a great difference between the over scrupulous and the delicate conscience. The latter takes cognisance of the most trivial wrongdoing but it draws a clear distinction between imperfection and venial sin and between minor faults and grave ones. The man of scruples tortures himself with the thought that he has sinned deeply, whereas in fact his offence has been a venial sin or no sin at all. In like manner we should not confuse scruples with a mistaken conscience. The latter is in error and its judgment a wrong one, but it is not in doubt; while the sufferer from scruples cannot reach a clear cut decision and is tortured by uncertainty.

4.

The man addicted to scruples lives in the shadows and can make no distinction where his conscience is concerned. In the picturesque but true phrase of Pere Gearon "he sees life through dark, or at least tinted glasses according to the severity of his ailment 1". He is a blind or short sighted man, unable to find his way unaided and in sore need of a helping hand to guide him lest he stumble at each step. Too often he is unaware of his blindness; and consequently unwilling to accept the advice and help of his guide. It is possible, but not certain, that this outlook may be the result of over confidence in his own judgement or of spiritual pride. Whatever the reason, the blind man, not realizing his blindness, considers himself insufficiently understood by his spiritual director: and the result is further mental agony for himself, and a new set of explanations for his confessor. *Once the sufferer from scruples recognises his spiritual blindness he is on the high road to recovery; and to this end should be devoted the combined efforts of confessor and penitent.*

1. Pere Gearon : Les Ames scrupuleuses consoles, Lethielleux, Paris.

5.

Deprived of the ability to see matters in their true light, the sufferer from scruples creates for himself a world of fantastic illusions. Here are a number of examples taken from real life.

A..., a cultured and highly intelligent young man, was making his thanksgiving after receiving the Blessed Sacrament when he noticed a white speck on one of his fingers. At once his imagination ran riot and he convinced himself that the white speck was a fragment of the Sacred Host, cast out of his mouth as he breathed. Was not this sacrilege? His mind tortured by doubt, he could not continue his prayers, or even stay in his place. Nothing would do him but to rush round to the sacristy, where the priest had infinite trouble in reassuring him.

M,, was a housewife who one day threw a number of disused little bottles into the garbage can and, when the scavengers had removed the latter, she began to torture herself with doubts lest the bottles might have contained some deadly poison. Should a child get hold of one of these he would be poisoned and it would be all her fault...

J...had the habit of spending the winter evenings reading by the fire with his feet on the hearth. Before going to bed he would make sure that he had not scorched the soles of his slippers but one examination would not satisfy him—he had to repeat it five or six times. Even that was not enough, he would get up out of bed to have another look lest by his criminal carelessness he set the house on fire and so cause the death of the occupants.

L... is a saleswoman in a department store, obsessed with the fear of cheating her customers. She cannot let one leave without asking her to count her change. "Are you sure I have not taken too much? I do not wish to do you an injury."

Every evening Mr. R... does the round of his flat. He makes sure that the gas is turned off, that the door is locked and the window hasps fastened. His round completed, he does it again; looking and feeling to make sure there is no escape of gas and that no way is left open for burglars.

M... can never get through her prayers. She commences the Our Father: "Our Father Who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come"... and then she stops abruptly. Perhaps she has had a distraction, perhaps she has not articulated her words clearly enough. She starts off again, but is more distracted than ever: "Our Father, Our Father—Our Father Who art in Heaven"...

Cases such as these are to be met everywhere. They indicate mental trouble, and indecision that are perfectly curable but which call for immediate and drastic treatment.

6.

The mind affected by scruples does not always reveal itself as obviously as in the cases we have cited above. It might be as well therefore to list other symptoms that indicate with certainty the condition of over scrupulousness.

*a}* To deem oneself to have committed sin where the truly tender conscience can find no fault.

*b}* To refuse to accept the judgment of one's regular confessor, to seek the advice of other priests and then to disregard it also.

*c}* During an examination of conscience, to dwell on the minute most details of one's actions; not to be content with the circumstances that accompanied one's actions but with those that might have accompanied

*d}* To prolong the examination of conscience beyond reason and to find one's mind all the more disturbed as the result.

*e}* To dwell in confusion on trivial details that have no bearing on the nature of the fault confessed.

*f}* To return constantly during confession to sins already confessed; to accuse oneself of a sin already confessed a few moments previously.

*g}* To torment oneself by recommencing and repeating one's prayers.

*h}* To make physical signs and gestures of refusal of temptation.

7.

Can you recognise in yourself the presence of some, or even one, of the symptoms indicated above? If you can, you should consider yourself a proved sufferer from scruples and should read this little book carefully. Its object is to help you and you should pay careful heed to the advice it contains and carry out precisely and with serious intention the mental exercises it recommends. You suffer from a mental ailment which you should hasten to resist before it can develop to the point where it can do injury to your physical and moral well-being.

The very word *scruple* conjures a picture for us, for it is derived from the Latin word *Scrupulus*, which means *little stone*.

Now it sometimes happens that, when walking, a pebble gets into your shoe, causing you pain and making it difficult for you to walk. When this happens, the sensible man takes off his shoe and extracts the offending pebble. If he neglects to do this, the friction will cause a sore, with consequent risk of infection and it is a fact that serious accidents have been caused by no more serious and apparently harmless incidents. Hikers, by the neglect of an elementary precaution, have become victims of tetanus.

You should observe the same precaution in the conduct of your interior life. Scruples can torture your conscience and hinder you in the normal and happy execution of your duties. You are spending yourself in interminable examinations of conscience which only serve to increase your mental disquiet and to dissipate your energy. Make haste to get rid of these phantoms that oppress you. If only you will pursue the treatment indicated in this book faithfully and with perseverance, we can assure you of success in your effort. It is essential for you to make it, for your

spiritual malaise, if left to itself, may have disastrous results, with which we shall deal in a later chapter.

### **Exercise No. 1.**

Impress upon yourself the fact that your whole intellectual outlook is being stultified and falsified by your scruples. Your mental outlook is clear enough where other people's affairs are concerned, but, in matters affecting your own conscience, you are helpless. Your outlook on what affects you personally is distorted – you are in fact blind. Now, a blind man does not venture on the street alone without risk of being run over; he has to submit to being led by a guide *whose eyes see for him*. You too, must submit to the guidance of another; otherwise you will stumble and fall. Not all the reasoning in the world; no deceptive glimmer of false light can alter the fact that, if you are not spiritually blind, your vision is either weak or distorted. It is therefore of paramount importance that you realize the necessity of a reliable guidance to which you can confide yourself without reserve. To achieve this realisation you should devote some minutes each day to thought and auto-suggestion, preferably first thing in the morning or last thing at night. Best of all, carry out this exercise before the Blessed Sacrament in the church. Repeat to yourself ten or twenty times: "*I know and I believe that I am but a poor blind man, and so I freely confine myself to the guidance of my spiritual director who sees the way I must go so much more clearly than I do. The more I follow his guidance the more quickly will the torment of my scruples abate themselves; they trouble me less and less and I know I am on the road to recovery.*"

### **Exercise No. 2.**

While persevering in your practice of auto-suggestion, help yourself with prayer which, offered with faith and sincerity, can never fail you. As you count the beads of your Rosary, repeat the humble supplication which the poor blind man of the Gospel addressed to our Divine Lord: "Lord, that I may see 1."

Jesus, who is *the Light of the World* 2, will enlighten and cure you. Do not forget, however, that your prayers will be heard in proportion to the faith with which you make them. Remember also that Our Lord sometimes defers his answers in order to increase our faith and the fervour of our desires.

1 LUKE XVIII, 41

2. JOHN VIII, 12.

## The Causes of Scruples

1.

The development of scruples may spring from varying causes and it is important that we should know these, because the necessary treatment varies according to the circumstances of individual cases.

Theologians trace scruples to three principal sources, God, the devil and the physical constitution of the sufferer. Pere Noldin adds a fourth: unwise reading of books too deep spiritually for the reader's comprehension 1.

1. Noldin : Principiis Theologiae moralis, p.226.

2.

It is an established fact, proved from experience, that **God sometimes tries certain souls by agonising ordeals of conscience**, but this does not mean that He is the direct cause of scruples. Scruples consist of error and unsound judgement and it would be abhorrent to Him Who is Truth Incarnate, to inspire false fears. God does *not* inspire scruples therefore; what He does do is to withdraw from the soul His light, which is necessary to interior peace. He leaves the soul to struggle in darkness, and therefore in anguish, but, in so doing His motive is love worthy of His infinite Charity. Sometimes He uses this method to inspire a more profound horror of sin, so that the soul will avoid it with more care than ever and will lead a more fervent interior life. Sometimes He makes use of scruples to purify the sufferer's conscience and to expiate a past life of grave sin. It is for this reason that crisis of spiritual agony occur frequently in the case of souls returning to the practice of their religious duties after long years of negligence or revolt. Sometimes God permits the darkness and torture to bring home to those over confident in their own resources a sense of their misery and nothingness. From scruples such souls learn a deeper sense of humility, which is an inestimable spiritual benefit. The more the human soul abases itself and realises its nothingness, the more will God raise it up and shower favours on it.

Sometimes God uses this martyrdom to complete the sanctification of a soul already far advanced on the road to perfection; as in the case of certain saints such as St. Alphonsus Liguori, to whom we have referred in the preceding chapter.

Scruples which originate from God's purpose do not last long: once they have produced the effect desired by Him they miraculously disappear. The shadows are dispersed, peace and joy flourish again and the soul is united to its Lord in closer and more confident intimacy than heretofore.

3.

**Scruples spring most frequently from the temperament of the sufferer.** People of sluggish or melancholic temperament are frequent victims to the evil, which finds in them fertile ground for its development. Facts prove beyond doubt the close association that exists between physical health and conscience troubles. Reuter has noted that certain sufferers from scruples suffer particularly severe crises in Spring and Autumn 1. It has also been observed that such people as religious who have practised a regime of too austerity, of those suffering from overwork are particularly subject to attack of scruples, which, however, disappear with the improvement of the sufferer's physical health. In support of this statement I would like to mention a conversation on the subject which I had many years ago with an eminent French physician, now dead, the late Professor Grasset. Meeting him at the house of a mutual friend, the conversation turned to difficulties experienced by priests in bringing consolation to sufferers from scruples and I expressed the opinion that certain cases seemed to me to be more fitting subjects for the doctor than for the priest. The professor, himself an ardent Catholic, listened to me and smiled. "It often happens" he replied "that sufferers from scruples experience, in addition to qualms of conscience, acute anxieties that have no religious or moral basis and, as far as these are concerned, the treatment needed is medical, not spiritual. Care of the soul is the preoccupation of the priest, but the curing of bodily ills is a matter for the doctor."

Scruples arising from physical causes often manifest themselves in unreasoning phobias and groundless fears. Typical examples are people who never cease washing their hands for fear of microbes, who scrutinise their letters again and again to see that they are properly stamped and addressed before putting them in the letter box, who ask again and again if they have paid for what they bought, who examine the door half a dozen times to make sure they have shut it; people who are not content with verifying their actions once but must repeat the action indefinitely. Such people seem unable to convince their minds with the evidence of their senses. A curious thing about people like this is their tendency to concentrate their preoccupation on some fixed objective, to the complete exclusion of the more important matters. They repeat their prayers three or four times over for fear of having omitted a word, but think little of saying unkind things about their neighbour. This is, of course, an error of judgement, for, while there is no wrong in the involuntary omission of a word from a prayer, it is beyond doubt a venial sin to speak ill of one's neighbour. Scruples arising from physical causes can be persistent and can become more and more serious unless remedial action is taken. They can only be banished by the removal of the physical malaise that produced them.

1. Reuter : *Neo Confessarius*. Herder, Fribourg, p. 434

4.

Theologians all agree on the fact that **the powers of evil can sorely trouble the conscience of man** and entangle it in a hopeless mesh of scruples. It is also a fact that many Catholics have no very clear ideas of the role played by evil spirits in the spiritual affairs of the human soul. Some people are too credulous about the supposed manifestations of diabolic interventions. Such as apparitions, noises and

external persecution. These phenomena are extremely rare and only occur in the cases of great saints.

On the other hand, there are many people who wrongly refuse to believe in the ordinary and natural intervention of the devil, although the Church is fully cognisant of his power to torment the human soul. The formulae of blessings found in the *Roman Ritual* are clear proof of this.

Satan is denied access to the sanctuary of the human soul, but is permitted to attack it indirectly through the brain and senses. He thus can inflame the imagination, excite the passions and implant groundless fears. He is forever prowling round us *like a raging lion* 1, as the Scripture tells us, seeking propitious moment to encompass our destruction. Scruples emanating from the devil may be recognised from their evil result. They engender lukewarmness, contempt for virtue and lead the soul to thoughts of despair. They magnify the evil of certain faults and minimise the deadly seriousness of really grave sin, thus leading the soul to the destruction of its moral fibre.

Such scruples redouble their intensity when the sufferer prays, carries out his religious duties or goes to Holy Communion. The obvious intention of Satan is to turn the would away from God so that by removing itself from the sources of grace it will the more easily fall into the evil snare prepared for it.

The Evil One does not trouble great sinners with scruples, for these unhappy souls are already in his power. It is only rarely that he uses this method of attack on great saints. For these dwell habitually in Perfect Charity, which leaves them immune from fear. The devil uses scruples as a weapon of attack on those whom he thinks vulnerable to it. The best way to banish these attacks by Satan is to refuse to let them trouble the interior peace of the soul. Be on your guard against avoidance of the Sacraments, neglect of prayers and religious practices and against letting yourself, through scruples, become a prey to discouragement. To do so would be to play the devil's game exactly as he wants it played and, seeing the success of his efforts, he will press home his attack by confusing your soul with ever increasing anxieties. If however, he finds that he cannot use scruples to turn you from your Faith and your duties, he will in the end give up his effort.

**5. Scruples sometimes derive from a false ideal of perfection.** Indiscriminate reading of books of a moral tone too lofty for the reader or books of too intense spirituality can cause grave misgivings to people whose sense of proportion is not infallible. Even the splendid example of the saints is capable of misinterpretation by people who strive to emulate their mysticism and heroic virtue without realising that such exceptional deeds can only be achieved with the help of exceptional gifts of grace.

It sometimes happens that, in the fervour of unenlightened zeal, pious people set themselves a spiritual idea that does not take sufficient cognisance of ordinary human frailty. Such people strive to exclude from their lives the legitimate recreations and simple human pleasures that are necessary to the soul and that allow it to relax and recuperate its energies. They find themselves falling short of the ideal they have set and quickly develop a troubled conscience. Such unquiet souls need



above all the direction of and experienced confessor, who will set their feet on the path of truth, the humble and sanctifying road of daily duties joyfully accomplished.

1. Even though you have read the preceding explanations with care it is doubtful if they have enabled you to diagnose accurately the cause of your own scruples. The Malady from which you suffer prevents you from taking an objective view of your own case. Nonetheless, even if you have been unable to trace the source of your scruples, the reading of what we have written should bring you some comfort, for at least you have learned one important fact; that all scruples have a cause, and that they will disappear with the removal of that cause. If you have been unable to discover from whence come these tortures that afflict you, your spiritual director will do so for you and will lay down a plan of action for you to follow. It is for you to submit yourself entirely to his guidance and to suppress all doubts that arise in your mind. Only by doing this will you escape from your troubles.

### **Exercise No. 1.**

Pursue regularly your daily course of autosuggestion. Say to yourself, and keep repeating: *I will faithfully follow the direction of my confessor, who is my guide.*

Once you have really grasped the fact that, with your powers of judgement clouded by scruples, you are spiritually blind or almost blind; once this conviction has taken firm root in your mind, you will find no difficulty in obedience. Your anxieties will assume their proper proportions as dreams and hallucinations.

### **Exercise No. 2.**

Form the double resolution neither to dwell on your scruples, nor, by reason of them, to neglect either your practice of your religious or the duties of your mundane affairs.

Make a clean breast of all your troubles to your confessor on the day appointed by him. Hold fast to his advice and drive away your fears as evil temptations. When you sense the coming of a period of spiritual travail, turn your mind away from it and seek refuge in your daily work. Occupy yourself with some healthy distraction; seek an agreeable companion and go for a long walk, for exercise is important. Above all, shun introspection and soul searchings, for you know from experience that such activities are not merely useless but positively harmful and that, far from resolving your uncertainties, they will only befog your mind still further. Renew this double resolution daily, preferably in the morning and evening, after your usual prayers. Repeat to yourself: *I am casting away my scruples for the groundless fears*

*that they really are, worthy only of silence and contempt. I am getting on better and better.*

### **Exercise No. 3.**

Devote yourself wholeheartedly to the carrying out of your duties in life. Tackle your work energetically and enthusiastically and try to make others share your sense of joy in work well done. Herein lies the road to sanctity, and God asks no more of you than this. Beware of creating for yourself an unreal standard of perfection, and be content to find it within the limits of Christian charity and your own environment. The more you devote yourself to the faithful discharge of your responsibilities, the more you fulfil the designs of Providence and the sooner will your scruples disappear.

## **III**

### **The Baneful Effects Of Scruples**

Whether they spring from physical causes or from the machinations of the Evil One, scruples imperil the soul and expose it to grave injury. It is only scruples arising from trials sent to us by God that bring good results, providing always that we accept them without flinching. Such scruples, if accepted with resignation and combated with energy, purify the conscience, reawaken fervour and increase the soul's horror of sin. We cannot over emphasise the fact that these scruples, though permitted by God, are nonetheless a spiritual malady, to be treated like all maladies, with the appropriate prudence. Divine Providence at times makes use of bodily ailments for the strengthening of souls destined to a high degree of sanctity. As a young man, St. Francis of Assisi dreamed of the glories and splendour of this world until a long illness taught him the vanity of mundane things and engendered in him an enveloping love for the Sovereign God. If, however, Francis had not been cared for during this Providential illness he would have died and the Church would have been the poorer for the loss of his example of heroic sanctity. The scruples to which we refer are in the nature of a Providential illness, but, like that of St. Francis, they must be wisely treated. Otherwise they will become envenomed and instead of fortifying our confidence, will end up by destroying it.

## **2. If we do not combat our scruples, they will lessen our confidence in**

**Providence.** The scruple-tortured soul, haunted by perpetual disquiet, comes to look upon God as a Judge Whose severity is untempered by pity. Instead of knowing God as the infinitely good Father that He is, such a soul comes to regard Him – forgive the simile – as a crabbed step-mother, always on the lookout for the smallest excuse to heap reproaches and blows on a detested stepchild. The victim of scruples admittedly does not think in these terms, but he acts as though he did. What a terrifying error! And how little the poor blind sufferer understands the spirit of the Gospel; "*God so loved the world, that he gave up for our redemption of His only begotten Son 1.*"

Jesus came on earth *to seek and to save that which was lost* 2. Far from being harsh to sinners, He pursued them to bring them back to the fold, to care for them and to cure them. If He could speak with such gentleness to the woman taken in *adultery*, if He dwelt on the plight of the Woman of Samaria, if He did not hesitate to shed the last drop of His Precious Blood to atone for our sins, can anyone doubt the immeasurable depth of His Mercy. Why then should the soul trouble itself with groundless fears? What will be the ultimate state of the victim of scruples if he does not liberate himself from their toils by fervent acts of faith in the Love and Mercy of Christ? He will no longer be able to pray with that unshakable confidence that storms the adorable Heart of Our Saviour and obtains all things from Him. Our Divine Lord demands complete confidence from us as an essential to effective prayer. *All things, whatsoever you ask when ye pray, believe that you shall receive; and they shall come unto you* 3. Consider how Christ acted towards the Canaanite woman who implored Him to cure her daughter. To test her faith, He made what seemed a severe reply and appeared to be unwilling to listen to her humble supplication. The woman however did not lose courage and pressed her demand even more ardently, so that Jesus cried out with joy: *Woman, great is thy faith*, and he added: *Be it done to thee as thou wilt* 4

1 John III, 6.

1. Luke XIX, 10.
2. Mark XI, 24
3. Matthew XV, 28

The victim of scruples is more terrified by God's Justice than confident in His Mercy. His prayers lack confidence and therefore lack efficacy, and so the distrust and fear against which he does not struggle sap the sources of grace which he needs so sorely. As assistance from on high diminishes, so will his courage and will to fight grow less. Unless he reacts vigorously there will be a perpetual drain on his spiritual resources, and he will fall into discouragement. Furthermore, the human soul craves to be at peace and cannot endure unending torment. That is why scruples, if permitted to flourish unchecked, lead too often alas, to the most culpable negligence of religious duties.

### **3. By making prayer difficult, scruples foster a distaste for it.**

In order to raise itself towards God, the soul requires interior peace, and scruples prevent the attainment of this. The sufferer from scruples flounders in a morass of doubts, fears and self searchings and it often happens that the moment when he tries to talk to God is the very moment when his anxieties are at their peak. Prayer is impossible until the inner tumult is stilled and so it happens that the confirmed victim of scruples prays little, and that badly. And yet prayer is an absolute essential to salvation; Our Lord himself has told us that we should always pray, and the Gospels leave us in no doubt whatever of its paramount importance.

### **4. Scruples are fatal to the practice of obedience.**

It has been proved a thousand times over by experience that the sufferer from scruples will not submit to guidance. He will not abide by the decisions of his own director and often consults various other confessors, only to ignore their advice also. Yet if only he could learn to obey, his condition would improve rapidly to the point of sure and final cure.

This inability to accept direction is a characteristic sign of the unduly scrupulous and is indeed an integral part of the affliction which makes it all the more difficult to treat. It arises from the fact that scruples have the effect of warping the spiritual outlook of the sufferer who, to again quote Pere Gearon, sees life through *dark of clouded spectacles*. His vision is impaired, if not destroyed and his conscience distorts facts, He argues somewhat along the following lines: "My confessor does not understand me, his advice is based on wrong premises; why therefore should I follow it?" He never asks himself by what right he charges his confessor with ignorance, obtuseness and lack of intelligence. Can he really believe that his confessor is too stupid to assess his case accurately or to sort out the relevant from the mass of irrelevancies with which he has been deluged quite unnecessarily

For the sufferer from scruples, the key to recovery lies in obedience. Christ, himself, *obedient to the death of the Cross* has commanded us to obey his priests who stand in His place. To hear them is to hear Him: to doubt them is to doubt Him.

When Our Lord appeared to St. Margaret Mary He sometimes gave her orders, but He stipulated that those orders must be endorsed by the Saint's religious superiors and He commanded her to obey their ruling. What greater proof could we have of the fact that the only sure way to salvation lies in obedience.

1. Philip II, 8

### **5. Scruples tend to make their victim anti social, for the**

sufferer who does not struggle against his idle fears becomes obsessed by them and thinks of and cares about nothing except his spiritual trials. He becomes morose and a prey to melancholy. His preoccupation with self prevents him from serving his neighbour and, to his cost, his unhappy

temperament make his a burden to his associates. He makes utterly unreasonable demands on the time and patience of his confessor, taking an hour to repeat over and over again the tale of his mental anguish. When, in his own interest, his confessor deems it useless to proceed further, the penitent becomes irritated and leaves his confessor discontented, as troubled as before and totally unaware of the patient manner in which his case has been handled.

#### **6. Scruples are injurious to the health,** for the perpetual anxiety

they cause puts an undue strain on heart, nerves and brain. If the evil is not resisted from the start it becomes progressively worse and may reach the stage when recovery will be extremely difficult. There is even danger of acute neurasthenia and perhaps madness. Our mental homes hold many unhappy inmates the start of whose mental decay was caused by scruples.

**7. Scruples due to the inspiration of the devil can have the most appalling results,** such as violent temptation to misconduct, despair and even suicide. This is not surprising when we reflect that the devil troubles the soul for one purpose only-its destruction. The picture is a grim one, but we can take heart from the fact that scruples sent by the devil can be easily banished if only we refuse to be terrified by them and follow faithfully our confessor's advice.

#### **Exercise.**

As a spiritual exercise, re-read this chapter carefully, paragraph by paragraph and examine your own case in the light of the information given. Then compel yourself to assess, as accurately as you can, the effects your scruples have on your spiritual life.

Is your confidence in God's Mercy and Goodness unshakeable?

Have your prayers the same ardent faith as formerly?

Have you the same complete confidence that they will be answered to the full extent compatible with your real good?

Is there any possibility that your good intentions have been diminished by your scruples?

Do you give complete obedience to your spiritual director?

Do you accept his resolution of your doubts without seeking alternative advice and do you accept his direction as being inspired by God?

Have your spiritual anxieties not injured your contacts with your neighbour?

Have you not become less cheerful, friendly and obliging that you were?

Have you not yielded to attacks of sadness or depression or experienced nervous irritation or headaches following on particularly acute crises of scruples?

Consider the damage done to you by scruples and then ask yourself if you have any right to allow the continuance of a cause that produces such ill effects. You have a

duty in conscience to help yourself, so make a truly firm resolve to employ the necessary remedies. What these are we will tell you in the following chapter.

Repeat to yourself frequently: *I am resolved to fight against my scruples and I am determined to conquer them at all costs*, but do not forget that all human effort is vain without God's help. Ask His help therefore and He Who is Light and Peace will restore tranquillity and clear vision to your soul.

## IV

### The Remedy for Scruples

1, **The sufferer from scruples must first of all convince himself that he is a sick man** and then proceed to discover the nature and results of his malady. He should re-read all that we have written in the preceding chapters of this book and should, above all, bear in mind what we cannot impress on him too often-the fact that his spiritual anxieties have warped his judgement and rendered him incapable of appreciating what is taking place in his mind. If you throw a stone into a clear pond it will disturb the mud so that the water becomes clouded and you can see nothing. It is the same with the scruple-tortured soul whose vision is clouded by his doubts and fears. It should also be remembered that scruples, if not resisted, can sap the physical, mental and spiritual powers of the patient, with possibly disastrous results. The sufferer who fully understands and accepts those two facts will have taken the first big step on the road to recovery.

2. **The first and imperative necessity for the sufferer is complete and absolute obedience to his confessor**, for, being himself spiritually blind or almost so, he must have the guiding hand of another. No argument can get round this simple fact and to say to oneself: *I don't think my confessor quite understands me*, will not help at all. Besides, by what right may one accuse one's confessor of incompetence and lack of experience when, by specialist training, study and vocation, he is so much more fitted to see clearly. *But my confessor may be wrong and, by taking too lenient a view of my transgressions, he may be setting my feet on the wrong road.* To this we reply simply: "Have you faith? If you have, why do you fear that Our Lord will blame you for giving the obedience, that from the Gospel we know, he expressly directed you to give. It is if you disobey that you will lay yourself open to His displeasure." Obedience is so necessary to the scrupulous penitent that without it he has no hope of being cured

1. **The sufferer should pay no heed to his fears**, for they are idle and have no solid foundation. Justifiable fear is not, as in the case of fear inspired by scruples, marked by uncertainty and spiritual torment. In general it influences the conscience in no uncertain manner and dictates to it a positive and clear cut decision.

Here are some practical and highly important rules for guidance.

*Do not prolong unduly your examination of conscience.* Far from dissipating your anxieties, overlong searchings of conscience will deepen them and add to your burden. Such examinations are not only useless but positively harmful. Even our confessional examinations should be brief and they will be sufficient to uncover obviously grave sins which are the only ones of which it is necessary for you to accuse yourself in the Sacrament.

"But" you may complain "if I follow your advice my confessions will lack the completeness I wish for them." The answer to this is of course that while the law of Christ imposes on us the duty of *prudently* ensuring the completeness of our confession, it does not ask us to make efforts beyond our competence to achieve this end. Our Lord instituted the Sacrament of Penance as a remedy, a help and a consolation; not as an instrument of torture. In exceptional cases the Church even dispenses with this obligation entirely. For example, on the battlefield or in case of shipwreck, does She not grant absolution without any confession at all of sins committed. On the other hand, She will never dispense with Contrition, which is the essential condition for the obtaining of pardon for sins. The sufferer from scruples instead of torturing his conscience with long drawn out and anxious examinations, should direct all his efforts towards true repentance.

*Do not keep harping back on the past.* There are people who suffer qualms of conscience about actions committed perhaps years ago, or who are uneasy because they fear that they might have omitted to confess some sin in a long past confession. They revive these old memories in the hope that by dealing with them now they will be able to lay the spectre of possibly imperfect confessions in the past, but in fact the result will be the direct opposite. The lapse of time will have dulled the sharpness of their recollections so that these retrospective self searchings will exacerbate their anxiety instead of calming it.

*Never undertake or omit an action under the compulsion of scruples alone.* The victim of scruples sometimes develops the fear that the omission or commission of some action will be sinful where in fact the question of sin does not arise at all. For example he will say to himself: "If I tread on these blades of corn on the path, am I not doing insult to a gift of God?" or perhaps again: "I may have been inattentive at Mass this morning and have not pronounced every word in my missal properly. I must therefore attend a second Mass under pain of sin." Let such a man attend Mass again by all means, but *not* because of his

scruple. For the reasons given in the next paragraph such fears should be ignored and under no circumstances yielded to.

## **2. Do not create moral obligations for yourself where none exist.**

Such obligations derive from natural and positive law, both Divine and human, and these laws are precise and positive in their demands. Where doubt exists, and hesitation, there is in all probability no obligation involved. The victim of such scruple-inspired anxiety can calm his conscience by saying to himself: "I am not sure that I have an obligation to do this or not to do that. Therefore I am free to act as I choose." Alternatively he may say: I am in doubt whether I have any right to do this or that, but I do know that people of high sanctity do it and deem it no harm. Therefore I can follow their example with complete safety."

## **3. Scrupulous people should avoid indolence, solitude and over-work.**

*Indolence* is harmful because it encourages introspection. The best possible way to forget one's mental preoccupations is to devote oneself to work and to do that work well. There are duties that at first sight appear to be distasteful and tedious but, if they are tackled wholeheartedly and cheerfully they become easy and pleasant.

*Solitude* is as bad as indolence, and for much the same reason. The sufferer from scruples should try to find a pleasant companion for his hours of ease; one who will help to distract his mind during acute periods of anxiety. Good conversation will dispel depression and for a time at least will turn his mind away from its troubles.

*Overwork or the practice of too much austerity* are to be avoided because of the strain they impose on the physical and nervous systems. We have already demonstrated that, in the majority of cases, scruples have a physical cause and so here is again proved the truth of the adage: *Mens sana in corpore sano*.

It may surprise some readers that we should raise the question of austerity, but we have very good reason for doing so, for there are scrupulous people who observe periods of Church Fasts so rigorously that they do injury to their nerves and minds. Such people should consult their confessor, who will permit them to fast or not according to the circumstances of their case.

People of great piety, members of religious orders, contemplatives, deprive themselves of sleep and nourishment in a spirit of penance. This is in itself an admirable practise, but it must be carried out in obedience



to a rule. The most robust constitution may be ruined by injudicious austerity. Even the great St. Bernard at the close of his life regretted the excessive austerity of his youth. For the ordinary man and woman there are other forms of mortification which can be undertaken without danger to mind or body; the complete resignation of the will to God, patience, humility and the constant and considerate practice of charity. This is the hard path, but it is also the sure way to sanctity.

#### **4. Scrupulous people should take care of their physical health.**

If, in the physical sphere, they develop signs of anaemia, or if their mental disquietude takes a more acute form, they should consult a doctor who will prescribe a course of treatment. Speaking in general terms, they should adopt a calming and strengthening regime. A sufficient quantity of food should be consumed slowly and properly masticated; work should be punctuated by short and regular intervals of relaxation. For the rest, treatment should consist of plenty of fresh air and exercise, seven or eight hours of sleep each night, deep-breathing exercises and hydrotherapy. There are of course other details of treatment, but these are better left to the doctor.

#### **5. Above all, the victim of scruples must pray.**

He must pray to God for the removal of his malady, so that he can serve Him better. His prayers must have the unquenchable confidence of perfect faith and he should most particularly seek the intercession of Our Lady, who is the **treasurer of Divine Grace**. Under no circumstances whatever should he abstain from the Blessed Sacrament, for the Eucharist is the natural nourishment of the soul and its source of strength. Scruples that engender the fear of receiving the Sacrament unworthily are a subtle form of temptation and a snare of the very devil himself.

#### **Exercise No. 1.**

We again recommend the spiritual exercise which we have explained already: the use of auto-suggestion to drive home to you once more the fact that scruples are a disease and that your chief hope of cure lies in your complete acceptance of your confessor's direction.

This exercise is all-important and, if carried out properly, will produce excellent results.

#### **Exercise No. 2.**

Repeat to yourself until your mind is steeped in them, the two principles we have laid down for the governance of your conscience:

"I can, with an easy mind, do the things which other people, whom I know to be good living, do."

" I am not bound in conscience to do or omit things which are not either commanded or forbidden by natural, Divine or human law."

### **Exercise No. 3.**

Force your mind to dismiss all thoughts of your scruples. Do not allow your anxieties to take hold of you for, if you do, you will sink into a morass of self searching and your last state will be worse than your first. Each time that you ruthlessly spurn your scruples you gain a moral victory and each such victory will be an important milestone on your road to recovery.

## **V.**

### **Interior Peace**

1. Peace and tranquillity of mind! Surely these are of all things the qualities most ardently longed for by poor souls who, tortured by their scruples, live a life of mental agony. Their troubles are often accentuated by the fact that they are misunderstood and even sometimes become objects of ridicule.

It is for such people that this book has been written; and if only they will study it carefully and follow fearlessly the advice it contains, they will surely attain the haven they seek. We propose therefore to close our work with some practical reflections on interior peace, so that sufferers from scruples can build their inner lives on a sound foundation. *Learn of Me*, said Jesus, *because I am meek and humble of heart; and you shall find rest in your souls 1.*

Humility and meekness – these, according to the Infallible Word, are the true sources of interior peace.

**2. Humility** consists of the full realisation and practical acceptance of the fact that we are literally nothing – worthless, powerless and helpless. Contrary to the opinion of warped minds, the virtue of humility, far from being degrading, is the wellspring of peace, strength and victory.

*The truly humble man knows his own weakness far too well to count on himself; and so he turns for strength to God, his one unbreakable support. Without me you can do nothing* 2 Christ assures us, and St. Paul adds: *I can do all things in Him who strengthens me.* 3.

1. *Matt. XI 29*

2. *John XV, 5*

3. *Philip IV, 13*

"Theresa alone counts for little", said the great saint of Carmel "but Theresa helped by God counts for a great deal." With confidence in God we can obtain all we desire. But we must understand that such confidence necessarily implies distrust of our own powers. This confidence and distrust are complementary – one cannot exist without the other.

*The humble of heart finds no difficulty in accepting the judgement of others, for, not deeming themselves superior to their neighbours, they do not cling unduly to their own opinion. They appreciate the fact that others may see things more clearly than they do and do not disdain to take advice. If only the sufferer from scruples could learn greater humility, surely he would yield himself more easily to the direction of his confessor and realise how much better than his troubled self the latter is qualified to judge his case.*

*The humble man does not forge for himself an unattainable standard of perfection, which God never intended for him. He does not attempt to scale the heights reached by the great mystics and, in the words of St. Francis of Sales, he is content to travel the lower slopes. He does not look beyond his horizon and accomplishes his destiny by the faithful performance of his daily duties in life. How many scruples have their origin in a wrong conception of virtue People dream of doing great deeds for God, but they neglect the daily tasks which He has imposed on them. They are grieved by what appears to them a pedestrian way of life and do not realise that holiness consists in the faithful carrying out of God's Will towards them. Our Lady has revealed that during her dedicated service in the temple, she considered herself the least of the daughters of Israel. The Annunciation threw her into inexpressible anxiety, for it had never been revealed to her that she was destined to be the Mother of God.*

*The humble man is not shocked by his own weakness. He has true contrition for his faults but they do not cause him despair. Knowing his worthlessness, he is not surprised by his fall, and instead of futile self reproach, he implores his Heavenly Father for support. The more he realises his weakness the more firmly he relies on Divine Grace.*

*The humble man prays with his whole soul. Knowing his helplessness, he implores Our Lord and His Blessed Mother to work through him and in him that which he cannot achieve without their help.*

*The humble man submits his will to God's in all things, for God is his Sovereign Lord and it is proper that the created should do the Will of the Creator. Furthermore, God is Infinite Love; so how can we not accept joyfully His plans for us, since these plans are dictated by His boundless love?*

The humble man asks God to spare him from trials but adds, as Jesus did in Gethsemene: *Not my will, but Thine be done* 1.

1. *Luke XXII, 42*

3. From humility springs **meekness**, that meekness that Our Saviour has promised will triumph. Blessed are the meek. For they shall possess the land 1.

Meekness means the patient and willing acceptance of sorrow and misfortune; the loving acceptance of those trials which, in His Love, God sends us. It means forbearance with our neighbour and a smiling forgetfulness of wrongs suffered from him and of defects in his character. It means the calm acceptance of one's personal faults, accompanied by constant efforts to correct them.

1. Matt. V, 4.

Sufferers from scruples can take heart, for the evil from which they suffer is far from being incurable. The writer of this book has had long experience throughout his ministry as a priest, and knows that complete recovery is possible and that troubled souls can regain peace. Their joy when that day comes will be all the greater by reason of the turmoil through which they have passed.

It must always be remembered however that recovery depends largely on the goodwill of the sufferer, who should follow precisely the methods outlined for him in this book. Our interior lives should be built on the main foundations of humility and meekness; those virtues which Jesus himself manifested in such a sublime and striking manner. Remember that Our Lady, the greatest, the most perfect and the fairest of all created beings, was also the most humble and that it was her humility that made her worthy to be the Mother of Christ. So we learn that God awards His favours to us in proportion to our humility of soul. The more we abase ourselves, the higher will God raise us.

Know therefore your own littleness and the full measure of your helplessness. If, by God's Grace, you should succeed in fashioning a gulf of humility in your soul, the Most High will hasten to irrigate it with that *torrent of Peace* 1 of which the Scriptures speak.

1. Isaiah LXVI, 12.