

On Scrupulosity, III

Scrupulosity works like a heresy. Heresy is a Greek word which means “to pick and choose.” A scrupulous man can tend to disregard much of the content of the Good News, such as “Rejoice in the Lord always.” (Phil. 4.4) This disregard comes from his idea that he is too great a sinner for the verses to apply to him. So the habit of not looking at the whole of the Gospel, or the whole of the doctrine of Holy Mother Church, is another factor contributing to the condition of scrupulosity.

Like everyone else, the scrupulous man experiences temporary bouts of depression, or fear or anxiety. But not like everyone else, he can wrongly attribute his vague depression to sin, thinking that he has committed some mortal sin which has resulted in the sadness. This erroneous association also works against progress in the interior life, when it is applied to dreams. If a dream involves a fantasy of sin, the scrupulous man can stew over whether he has committed a sin or not. In all these kinds of false associations, there is an “all-or-nothing” pattern of thinking. To think that if something is not done perfectly is automatically sinful is a habit which the scrupulous need to be aware.

“All things in moderation.” There is a great deal of wisdom in that ancient phrase. The Church has always recommended temperance; avoiding excess in food, drink, drugs/medicine or tobacco. And where temperance is not possible (as in the case of alcoholism say, or with most cigarette smokers), then she always recommends complete abstinence. In the case of a scrupulous man, this is important to consider, since poor health habits (poor eating habits, lack of exercise) are often linked to various kinds of depression, and these depressions can engender obsessive thinking, and intensify the scrupulous thinking.

The masters of the spiritual life frequently saw eating as something to be done simply and sparsely. They saw gluttony as a serious threat to the soul. St. Ignatius of Loyola put it this way: “As to foods, greater and more complete abstinence is to be observed. For with regard to them the appetite tends more readily to be excessive, and temptation to be insistent. To avoid disorder concerning foods, abstinence may be practiced in two ways: First, by accustoming oneself to eat coarser foods; secondly, if delicacies are taken, to eat of them only sparingly.” An alkaline diet – dominant in fruits and vegetables – is commonly recommended by most nutritionists. But it is nothing new, since this has been recommended by the earliest of the Church Fathers to the present day observance of the Rule of St. Benedict.

Two more physical factors to consider are sleep and exercise. Poor sleep hygiene can contribute significantly to an inordinate sadness. It is well-known that light is the key to waking up, more than any other factor. Going into bright light in the morning at the same time each day sets our biological clocks better than anything. And leaving that light at the end of the day, getting into sleep clothes, avoiding intense lights such as the television or computer, contribute greatly to a good rest. Irregular sleep patterns make the body feel worse. And lack of exercise reduces the respiratory rate, decreases metabolism, and decreases energy level. In short, poor sleep and lack of exercise make the flesh even weaker than it already is.

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

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

If the scrupulous man is unaware of the tactics of the devil, temptations will impact his condition more than the average man (though this goes for anyone). For example, when the devil tempts Eve in the Garden, he sought to create a false image of God, to interfere with the relationship between man and God. He persuades Eve that she will not die if she eats of the fruit, and that God knows that when she eats of it she will be like God, knowing the difference between good and evil. This is an old trick. The devil seeks to put a false image of God in the heart of the scrupulous person, by convincing him that God is not a loving Father, but a despot, whose demands are arbitrary, unfair, and harsh.

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

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

Now we must look at the process of healing scrupulosity, which is to transform it into the love of God.