

On Scrupulosity, I

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

Scrupulosity is an emotional condition which produces anxiety and fear (sometimes very great anxiety and fear) from the thought of eternal damnation, due to an oversensitivity to sin. There are two types of it at least:

1. Developmental. This refers to a short phase on a man’s life. Youth often experience this anxiety if they become serious about their faith. Adults can experience it after a conversion, or as they begin to reflect seriously on the purpose of life. Those who experience it will find it to be temporary, and which normally disappears as they avail themselves of the ordinary means of sanctification.

2. Emotional. This refers to an enduring condition that has its times of intensity, and then goes back to a mild affliction, but which can go on for years and sometimes for the rest of one’s life. The purpose of these inserts will be to address emotional scrupulosity, speaking especially of the means by which this condition may be healed. First, we need to go into a good description of scrupulosity. For those who want a good resource on this, look at [Crippled by Fear: Understanding the Scrupulous](#), by Fr. Daniel Lowry, CSSR.

This condition is a religious-moral-psychological state of anxiety, fear and indecision. It is coupled with extremes of guilt, depression, and the fear of punishment from God. But each man that suffers from it does so uniquely. There is no one mold or pattern into which a scrupulous man may fit. For example, one man might have a great desire to be pure and chaste, but then experiences scruples concerning sexual thoughts. In this way a soul’s strong point becomes a breeding ground for scruples. But another might be horrified at their lack of charity, and develops scruples about the slightest of interactions with others.

Most who suffer from this condition have only one image of God, as if God were only an exacting master. In consequence, they think that in order to be loved by God and saved from damnation; they must become the perfect slave. The perfect slave then goes about trying to cut out from his life certain *spheres* of sin if you will – not just the sins but everything which surrounds the sin. In order not to sin, he then thinks he must control any thought which might possibly lead to sin. Because of this desire to suppress thoughts, he tends to form rigid formulas or maxims as absolutes. Coupled with this desire is his fear of discovering anything about sins with which he is not familiar, since this might lead to a “contamination;” the introduction of new sins. He tries to stay vigilant, in a white-knuckled sort of way, and experiences great anxiety (sometimes agonizing) if the improper thought will not depart him. When this happens, he usually apologizes to God profusely, and begins to perform a ritual of prayer or penance, becoming a kind of moral hypochondriac.

Although he believes the Sacred Scriptures to be the word of God, he will tend to focus on some aspect of the verse, and turn it to his condition. Indeed, “Whatever is received, is received according to the mind of the receiver,” as St. Thomas said. In this way, when he

reads “If you love me, keep the commandments...” he will not focus on the friendship with God which the verse is about, but instead will hear this: “If you keep my commandments I will love you.”

You can see how the following verses could be agonizing for the scrupulous: “You must be perfect even as your heavenly father is perfect.” “Work out your salvation in fear and in trembling.” “Anyone who has looked with lust at a woman has already committed adultery in his heart.” “Blasphemy against the Holy Ghost will not be forgiven.”

With these verses ringing in his ears, he goes to confession, doubting and doubting whether his sins are venial or mortal. When he leaves the confessional, he wonders if the confession was defective, thinking:

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

In some souls, as a result of this, they think they cannot receive the Holy Eucharist because they fear so much the offending of God. They can find it very difficult even to be in church where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, or they even fear to be in any physical proximity to a priest.

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

Numerous saints have experienced scrupulosity. St Ignatius of Loyola “doubted that his past sins were truly forgiven” and “compulsively examined his conscience for hours at a time.” St. Therese of Liseux used to examine and re-examine all her motives; and in her uncertainty and doubt, her work, health and prayers suffered. St. Alphonsus de Liguori suffered tremendously from scruples. There are many more who experienced scrupulosity but who struggled through it and were healed by God’s grace.

Do not think of those who carry the cross of scrupulosity as deficient or crazy. Think of them as very brave and courageous, for continuing to practice their faith under very difficult burdens.

In the next insert, we will look at the causes of scrupulosity.