

On Scrupulosity, II

The condition does not come from religion, as Freud would have us believe, but it does seem to emanate from the way religion is presented. For example, it is indeed a law that one must attend Mass on Sundays. There is nothing wrong with the content, or if you will the religion of that truth. But if a lad makes the mistake of thinking that he will become virtuous if he follows the law, then a line might be drawn in his soul: Going to church is good, missing church is bad. But the line does not stop there in a scrupulous conscience; other lines must be drawn. Thus missing the prayers at the foot of the altar are displeasing to God; not saying preparatory prayers five minutes before Mass is displeasing to God, coming ten minutes early and saying the prayers, but not saying them with attention is displeasing to God...line after line is drawn.

Now there's no use in blaming the parents any more than religion, since parents might have taught the Faith quite well, but the child decided to focus on the laws of the Faith and not the virtues, and with an imbalanced view of those laws.

On the other hand, it is quite possible for children to be brought up in a performance-oriented home environment, where love becomes downright conditional. "If you clean your room correctly, you'll receive my love." Perhaps such a blunt statement is not given, but received, since the child understands that mom's affection is withdrawn until that room is clean. It's not uncommon for a child to transfer this conditional love to God, and think that his identity as a Catholic does not stem from their adoption at Baptism which makes them a child of God, but is instead related to performance, and/or perfect performance.

Thus it is that heresies and errors can act as a seedbed for scrupulosity. There was once a British monk named Pelagius, who taught that a man can observe God's law by human effort alone, and that grace was not needed for that observance. If this idea (the heresy of Pelagianism) gets in the soul, then it is an easy step to start thinking that *any* lack of perfection is "...all my fault. This business of salvation is my work, so I'd better be perfect when I ..." Thus salvation becomes not cooperation with grace, but personal effort and achievement.

Jansenism is another heresy in which scrupulosity can grow quite well. Since it emphasized that Christ did not die for all, and that we must do extreme penances on a regular basis, and man's sinfulness was stressed, thus leading to very infrequent communion, we can see how it would flower into scrupulosity as a matter of course.

Manichaeism is another source. One of the principles of this heresy is that matter is evil. So if a child grows up with an attitude of modesty that is extreme, where the flesh is seen as evil because it is the cause of forbidden impulses, then the slightest catering to the demands or needs of the flesh can result in a torment which rejects the goodness of the body.

Another source can be the media, even the Catholic media. Most psychologists try to get their patients who suffer from OCD away from any media which is saturated with negative, or sad, or depressing news (most of the news fits this description it seems to me), since that morose atmosphere just exacerbates the OCD. And since most media is laced with immorality in our times (as is the case with television), that too can trigger great remorse and skepticism in the soul about proper behavior.

I should say at this point, that there is no evidence that OCD is genetic. One can see that because a parent has an anxiety disorder, it will not follow that the child will have the same disorder, or the grandchild. A tendency to some anxiety might be somehow transmitted of course, but even that does not appear to be uniform. In a similar way, it seems clear that scrupulosity is not determined by genetics. The Fathers of the Church consider scrupulosity or psychasthenia (as the Greek Fathers called it) – the inability to resolve doubts or resist obsessions and compulsions even after realizing the doubts are senseless – as a spiritual problem that leads to a psychological malfunction.

Does pride come into this? It would seem not, since many scrupulous persons do not see themselves as better than others, and have a very low self-image, and do not want to remain in their condition. But it is part of the problem, not stemming from a desire to be prideful, but from an ignorance of God's love and mercy, and an oversensitive conscience. St. Therese of Lisieux, after being healed of oversensitivity and scruples, learned from our Lord that her troubles arose from "...self sufficiency and self-esteem, from a vainglorious concern about her own reactions and the inordinate value that she put on herself." Christ also said to St. Faustina regarding her doubts and temptations: "Sensitiveness and discouragement are the fruits of self-love. You should not become discouraged, but strive to make my love reign in place of your self love."

Pride in one sense is an inordinate self-esteem, leading to thinking about oneself too much, and desiring to control one's life too much. It is opposed to humility, which acknowledges cheerfully that all good comes from God. Thus pride can impel the scrupulous man to spend an inordinate amount of time dwelling on his sin and lack of perfection, instead of dwelling on the charity towards God and neighbor. Similarly, the Catechism of the Catholic Church lists indifference and acedia as consequences of pride. One who is indifferent neglects to meditate on God's love; and the one who has acedia (spiritual sloth) refuses to accept God's joy at times. The more he feels sorry for himself, the more his reserves of energy drop, which leads to more sorrow for himself.

Finally, pride can make everything worse by pushing the soul to distrust the representative of the Church. Even though the Church has been dealing with scrupulosity for centuries, the scrupulous man can worry whether the confessor is totally holy, and is quick to look for flaws of character in the confessor or in his advice. The advice may never be strict enough, since the scrupulous soul often gravitates to what is severe, morose and puritanical.

We need to look at the causes in more depth, which will be continued in the next insert.