

Beginning to Deal Effectively with the Cross of Scrupulosity

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The material in this presentation draws from my personal experience, my pastoral experience, accumulated wisdom shared with me by wise priests, and especially the fine (though a bit difficult-to-read for moderns) work by Fr. William Doyle, S.J., which may be downloaded at: <https://fatherdoyle.files.wordpress.com/2010/06/scruples-and-their-treatment.pdf>

Introduction

Not all priests have received an adequate training in how to deal with scrupulous consciences. Moreover, some modern publications are problematic in the treatment they give of scrupulosity, offering solutions that are not fully rooted in our long spiritual tradition, that thus risk leading souls astray. I strongly encourage any priest who may be looking for more complete guidance on this topic to read the booklet by Fr. Willie Doyle, linked above. The following, in any case, is a concise attempt to synthesize accumulated wisdom on scruples and their treatment and is rooted also in my personal and pastoral experience.

Anyone suffering from scrupulosity should submit him or herself to the guidance and direction of a prudent priest. One cannot direct oneself through such a tortured spiritual state. While I hope this summary will help, *I do not intend for it to be a self-help resource*. It may aid understanding, but that deepened understanding should then be brought to one's relationship with an experienced confessor, who – we pray – will know how to guide the soul to spiritual freedom.

What Scrupulosity Is

Scrupulosity stems from an irrational fear (often outside one's control), sometimes also from pride, and sometimes also from a more serious personality disorder. It ends up causing a turning-in on oneself and becomes self-feeding; that is, it tends toward getting worse, not better, unless it is handled a certain way.

The fear is clearly of God's judgment and its consequences, "the loss of heaven and the pains of hell". This may be fueled by a person's tendency to have a more sensitive conscience. There may also be spiritual temptation at play. If it is a question of mere tendency, then the person must try to recover equilibrium and not indulge what is clearly an exaggerated sensitivity. If it is from spiritual temptation (i.e., from forces of evil), then the person must resist. Sometimes both factors are involved.

Pride may enter in, insofar as the scrupulous person may ultimately believe the lie that he can save himself by being extremely rigorous in his moral discipline. He or she starts to examine himself – let us say it – almost mercilessly, "raking him or herself over the coals" and holding him or herself to a standard that no mortal being could ever hope to achieve. But pride can blind him or her to this, and so he continues in this way – and only becomes worse off because of it.

The possibility of a personality disorder, such as Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD), also exists in some cases. While a prudent priest cannot take the place of a psychologist or licensed

counselor, he can usually help a scrupulous person to discern if OCD or similar may also factor into the condition; that is, if the afflicted individual may also need the help of a professional counselor, psychologist, or psychiatrist. It is often best to start by talking with a prudent and experienced priest, since scrupulosity does not always involve OCD and sometimes it can be initially difficult to tell. A good priest will know to what point he can be helpful and when someone else's help may be needful.

Scrupulosity is, as mentioned above, also self-feeding: it is like a “monster” that is never satisfied. The more one rakes him or herself over the coals, analyzing sins and even seeing sin where it is not, the more one wants to analyze further. It is almost as if the afflicted person *wants to be guilty*: he or she effectively decides in advance – without realizing it – that he or she is guilty of this or that sin, then seeks a way to support that preconceived conclusion. This approach never brings relief or satisfaction.

The Solution

The solution to scrupulosity is, for most, counter-intuitive: it involves their having to do something that, under the influence of their scrupulous tendency, they might consider to be “moral laxity”. The prudent priest who offers this counsel, however, sees from a healthier viewpoint and knows that he is not counseling laxity. These steps are needed:

- In order to deal with the fear element, they are encouraged to trust and “let God be God”;
- In order to address the possible pride element and also with any spiritual temptation element, they are encouraged to be *humbly obedient* to another;
- In order to deal with the self-feeding element, they are encouraged to make an immediate judgment and then not question themselves.

If they take these steps (explained further below), they will eventually find relief – possibly even healing. If they do not, they only “feed the monster” further, and head toward more serious problems: rejecting God entirely, insanity, despair, or some other serious problem.

The Steps Needed

The scrupulous person, in order to overcome his or her struggle, **MUST**, without questioning it, do the following:

1. Submit him or herself humbly to the direction of a trusted priest-confessor;
2. Not confess any sin (real or imagined) unless he or she is **MORALLY CERTAIN** – *as sure as the glowing ball in the sky is the sun and not Jupiter, or as sure as $2+2=4$* – that it is a mortal sin. This means that he or she must imagine him or herself standing in the presence of God himself, having to render an account for his or her life, and, in that very moment, would be **SURE without any doubt** that what he or she was giving an account for was **TRULY** a mortal sin, and not otherwise;

3. Not go to confession more than once every two weeks, unless **MORALLY CERTAIN** that there was a mortal sin (that completed all three conditions: grave matter, full knowledge, and full freedom);
4. Must commit to praying **DAILY** for deliverance from scrupulosity and from every evil spirit that could be exacerbating it (see prayer to Our Lady of Victories, below);
5. Must resolve to **LOOK AHEAD** and **NOT LOOK BACK**, resisting always the temptation to go back and analyze this or that sin. That means that he or she must make an **IMMEDIATE** decision about a sin and not go back and analyze it over and over again, with mental anguish;
6. Must not abstain from Holy Communion, ever, **EXCEPT** when – as sure as $2+2=4$ or the sun is hot – he or she is **CERTAIN** that he or she is in mortal sin;
7. Must be **HONEST** with his or her confessor about the foregoing. Maybe there are times of failure, of “feeding the monster”, of “giving in”; he or she must tell the confessor about this;
8. Must try to **THINK LESS OF HIM OR HERSELF** and **MORE OF OTHERS**. Scrupulosity turns a person in on him or herself and causes him or her to “navel-gaze”, that is, focus inordinately on him or herself.

For Many, Scrupulosity Can Be Overcome

1 John 3:20: “If our hearts condemn us, God is bigger than our hearts” – he is always able to overcome in us any spiritual struggle with which we may be faced. We must foster this confidence: he can help me and he can fully heal me. *I MUST NOT GET DISCOURAGED!*

Prayer to Our Lady of Victories

St. Thérèse of Lisieux had a struggle with scrupulosity as a child. (You can read about it in her spiritual autobiography, *The Story of a Soul*.) She was healed when she prayed to the Blessed Mother and a statue of Our Lady of Victories appeared to smile at her. We cannot expect that statues will do miraculous things. But we can pray to Our Lady and ask her help – and then hope that she will obtain the special graces we need!

O Victorious Lady!
 You, who always have such powerful influence
 with your Divine Son in conquering the hardest of hearts:
 intercede for me in this great struggle,
 that my heart may be softened and be capable
 of giving itself, in trust, entirely to your Divine Son,
 our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
 Amen.