

This treatise on scruples is taken directly from Fr. Tanquerey's book titled "the Spiritual Life," Desclee & Co, Tournai, 1930.

## Scruples

934. Scruples are a disease, physical and moral, which produces a sort of derangement of conscience, and causes one to harbor vain fears, of having offended God. This disease is not restricted to beginners; still, it is found in them as well as in the more advanced souls. Hence, we must say a word about them and explain: 1) the nature, 2) the object, 3) the disadvantages and advantages of scruples, and 4) the remedies against them.

### I. Nature of Scruples

935. The term scruple (from the Latin scrupulus, pebble) was employed for ages past to designate a weight under which only the most sensitive scales would tilt. In the moral sense, it stands for some trifle which only the most delicate conscience would notice. Hence, this word has come to be commonly used to designate the anxiety about having offended God which certain souls feel for little or no reason. The better to know the nature of scruples we shall explain their origin, and degrees, as well as the distinction between a scrupulous and a delicate conscience.

936. 1) Origin. Scruples arise sometimes from purely natural causes and sometimes they are due to supernatural intervention.

a) From a natural point of view, scruples are often a physical and moral disease. 1) The physical ailment which brings about this disorder is a sort of nervous depression, which hinders a well-balanced decision on moral questions and tends to produce without solid reasons the obsessing idea that one has sinned. 2) There are also moral causes which produce the same effect, such as a meticulous mind, a mind that loses itself amid the most trifling details, that wants to reach absolute certitude in all things; a beclouded mind, that represents God not as a just judge, but as a merciless one; a mind that confuses feeling with consent in human acts, and imagines, that because the imagination has been for long alive to vivid impressions, sin has been committed; an obstinate mind, that prefers its own judgment to that of the confessor for the very reason that it lets itself be led by impressions rather than by reason.

When these two causes, physical and moral, are present, the evil is more deeply rooted and the cure is more difficult.

937. b) Scruples can also arise from a preternatural intervention on the part of God or of the devil.

1) God allows us to be thus obsessed either as a punishment, chiefly of our pride, of our inclinations to vain complacency, or as a trial, to make us expiate our past faults, to detach us from spiritual consolations, and bring us to a higher degree of sanctity. This is the case especially with the souls whom He wants to fit for contemplation, as we shall explain when treating of the unitive way.

2) The devil also at times injects his activity into the morbid predisposition of our nervous system in order to create a turmoil in our souls. He persuades us that we are in the state of mortal sin in order to hinder us from receiving Holy Communion, or to hamper us in the discharge of our duties of state; above all, he strives to deceive us as to the gravity of some act or other in order to make us sin, because of a false conscience, even when there is no matter for sin and much less for grievous sin.

938. 2) Degrees. Evidently there are many degrees in scruples, a) At the outset it is simply question of a meticulous conscience, extremely fearful, which sees sin where sin does not exist; b) then it is a matter of transient scruples which one submits to the judgment of one's spiritual director, accepting forthwith his decision; c) lastly, it is a case of scruples properly so called, tenacious and obstinate.

939. 3) Distinction between a Scrupulous and a Delicate Conscience.

a) Their genesis or starting point is not the same. The delicate conscience loves God ardently and, in order to please Him, wants to avoid the least fault, the slightest willful imperfection. The scrupulous" conscience is led, on by a certain egotism which causes an inordinate eagerness for absolute certainty of one's state of grace.

b) The delicate conscience, possessed of a horror of sin and knowing its own feebleness, has a rational, yet quiet fear of displeasing God; the scrupulous conscience harbors vain fears of sinning in every circumstance.

c) The tender conscience knows how to discriminate between mortal and venial sin, and, in case of doubt, abides by the judgment of the spiritual director; the scrupulous conscience peevishly questions the decisions of the spiritual director and submits to them only with difficulty.

Whilst scruples are a real evil to be carefully avoided, there is nothing more precious than a delicate conscience.

## II. The Subject matter of Scruples

940. 1) Sometimes scruples are universal, bearing on all subjects. Before an action, they magnify beyond all proportion the dangers that may be encountered in this or that circumstance; after an action, they fill the soul with groundless anxieties and easily convince it of having sinned gravely.

941. 2) More often scruples bear upon a number of particular subjects.

a) Past confessions: even after having made several general confessions, one is not satisfied, one fears lest all has not been accused, or lest sorrow has been defective, and one wants always to begin all over again,

b) Evil thoughts: the imagination is filled with dangerous or obscene thoughts, and since these make a certain impression, one fears one has given consent, nay one is sure of having consented, although one was quite displeased at them,

- c) Blasphemous thoughts: because such ideas cross the mind, one is persuaded of having acquiesced in spite of the horror one experiences,
- d) The virtue of charity: one has for instance, listened to conversations against the neighbor without protesting; one has, through human respect, neglected the duty of fraternal correction, one has scandalized the neighbor by indiscreet talk, or, one has failed, upon witnessing a crowd congregate, to ascertain whether an accident had occurred where the ministrations of a priest might have been needed to give absolution to the dying; in all this, grievous sins are seen,
- e) The correct pronunciation and enunciation of the words of Consecration, the integral recitation of the Divine Office, etc....

### III. Disadvantages and Advantages of Scruples

942. 1) When one has the misfortune of allowing oneself to be governed by scruples, baneful effects follow for body and soul:

- a) Scruples gradually induce a weakening and a certain unbalancing of the nervous system. Fears and continual anguish exercise a depressing action on bodily health; they may even become a real obsession and bring about a species of monomania, bordering on insanity.
- b) Scruples becloud the mind and distort the judgment: little by little one loses the ability to discern between what is sin and what is not sin, what is grievous and what slight; and the soul becomes much like a ship without a rudder.
- c) Loss of true devotion is often the sequel. The strain of living in anxiety and vexation turns one into a terrible egotist for whom everybody becomes an object of mistrust, even God, whom one deems too severe. Complaints arise that He leaves one in that wretched state. Evidently, the heart is incapable then of any genuine devotion.
- d) Finally, come faults and even grave falls, 1) The scrupulous spend their strength in useless efforts over trifles, and retain but little energy to meet important issues, for the attention cannot be directed to bear with equal intensity upon the entire line of battle. Hence, surprises, faults and at times even grievous sins. 2) Besides, they instinctively seek relief for their sorrows; but finding no solace in piety, they seek it elsewhere, in reading and in associations that are dangerous. This is sometimes the occasion of lamentable falls which throw them into a deep state of dejection.

943. 2) On the other hand, if we know how to accept scruples as a trial, and to correct them gradually with the help of a wise spiritual director we derive from them priceless advantages.

- a) They serve to purify the soul. By being intent on avoiding the least sin and the least willful imperfection, we acquire a great purity of heart.
- b) They lead us to the actual exercise of humility and obedience by obliging us to refer our doubts in all simplicity to our spiritual director, and to follow his counsel with entire submission not only of will, but of judgment.

c) They contribute to increase the purity of our intentions by detaching us from spiritual comforts and by having us cling solely to God for Whom our love increases the more He puts us to the test.

#### IV. Remedies against Scruples

944. Scruples must be attacked before they take deep root in the soul. Now the great remedy and indeed the only remedy is obedience, full and absolute obedience to an enlightened spiritual director. The light of conscience has become dim and we must seek enlightenment elsewhere.

A scrupulous person is exactly like a ship without rudder or compass. The spiritual director, therefore, must win his confidence and must know how to wield authority over him if he is to effect a cure.

945. 1) Before all else, it is necessary to gain his confidence; (for we do not easily obey those whom we do not trust.) This, however, is not always easily accomplished. True, the scrupulous soul instinctively feels the need of a guide, but some scrupulous persons do not dare abandon themselves entirely to the said guide; they want to consult, indeed, but also to discuss the reasons. Now, one must not enter into any discussion with the scrupulous, but speak to them with authority, telling them categorically what they must do.

To inspire this confidence the spiritual director must merit it both by his competence and his devotedness.

a) He will allow the penitent to speak first, limiting himself to a few remarks here and there to show that he has thoroughly understood. After that he will put a few questions to the penitent, to which the latter will answer yes or no, and thus the director will himself conduct the methodical examination of the penitent's conscience. Then he will add: I understand your case, you suffer in this or that manner. To see that he has been well understood is already a great comfort to the penitent, and at times suffices to win his confidence.

b) Devotedness must be joined to competence. The spiritual director should therefore show himself patient, listening quietly to the lengthy explanations of the penitent, at least at the beginning. He must be kind, taking an interest in that soul and expressing the desire and the hope of curing it. He must be gentle, refraining: from taking a tone of severity or harshness, even when he is obliged to use the language of authority. Nothing wins confidence better than this union of kindness and firmness. 946. 2 Once the spiritual director has: gained the confidence of his penitent, he must exercise his authority and exact obedience, saying : If you want to be cured you must obey blindly : in obeying you are always safe, even if your spiritual director be mistaken, for God demands of you only one thing just now, and that is obedience. This is so true that if you think that you cannot obey me, you must seek another spiritual director. Blind obedience alone can cure you, and it will certainly do so.

a) In giving his orders the spiritual director must be direct, clear and precise, avoiding any equivocation; he must be positive, speaking categorically, never conditionally; for instance,

he will not say: If that disturbs your peace, do not do it; rather he will say: Do this, avoid that, spurn such temptation.

b) Generally, no reasons must be given for the decisions, especially at the beginning. Later on, when the scrupulous penitent is capable of understanding them, and of feeling their weight, the director should briefly state these reasons in order to form his conscience little by little. But there must be no discussion of the decision itself. If there be any obstacles to prevent its immediate execution, they are to be taken into account, but the decision stands.

c) The spiritual director must not reverse his judgments. Before giving a decision he considers it fully, and gives no orders that he cannot insist upon; but once an order has been given, it must not be revoked so long as there is no new fact requiring a change.

d) To ascertain if the order has been clearly understood, penitents should be asked to restate it, and then it but remains to have them carry it out. This is difficult; but they must be plainly told that they must report on it, and that if they have failed to follow the advice given, they will not be listened to until they have complied. There will be ample opportunity, therefore, to repeat the same injunction many times. This is to be done without losing patience, but with increasing firmness, and in the end the scrupulous persons will yield obedience.

947. 3 When the moment arrives, the spiritual director must inculcate the general principle that will enable scrupulous penitents to disregard all doubts and if need be, he will have them put this principle in writing in this or a similar form : I am in conscience, bound to take only evidence into account, that is to say, a certitude that excludes all doubt, a certitude as clear as the one" that tells me that two and two make four. I cannot, therefore, commit a sin either mortal or venial, unless I am absolutely certain that the action I am to perform is forbidden under pain of mortal or venial sin, and that fully aware of this fact, I will nevertheless do it just the same. I will, therefore, pay no attention whatsoever to probabilities, no matter how strong they may be, I will hold myself bound solely by clear-cut "and positive evidence. Barring such, there is no sin. When the penitent proceeds to accuse himself of having committed a venial or a mortal sin, the confessor must ask: Can you affirm under oath that before acting you saw clearly - that, this action was a sin and that seeing this you gave full consent? Such a question will give precision to the general principle laid down and will make it better understood.

948. 4 Lastly, this general principle must be applied to the specific difficulties that arise.

a) With regard to a general confession after allowing it once, the confessor should permit no repetition except when there is certainty, on these two points: i) a mortal sin was committed, and 2). this sin has never been accused any valid confession. As for the rest, after a certain lapse of time the spiritual director should declare that the past must not be touched upon under any circumstances and that, should some sin have been omitted, it has been already pardoned along with the others.

b) With regard to interior sins, thoughts and desires, the following rule should be given - .during the crisis, divert your attention by thinking of any other thing; after the crisis, do not examine yourself to see if you have sinned or not (this would bring back the temptation), but

pursue the even tenor of your way by devoting yourself to your duties of state, and receive Holy Communion as long as there is no evidence that you have given full consent (n. 909). 949.

c) Communion is often a torture to the scrupulous. They fear lest they be not in the state of grace or be not fasting. Now, i) the fear lest they be not in the state of grace proves that they are not certain of that fact; hence, they should after a sincere act of contrition approach the Sacrament of the Altar; this contrition together with Holy Communion will put them in the state of grace if they are not in it; 2) The Eucharistic fast must not prevent the scrupulous from receiving Holy Communion unless they are absolutely certain of having broken it.

d) Confession for the scrupulous is a still greater torture, and therefore, it must be simplified for them. They should be told: 1) You are not bound to accuse any except mortal sins. 2) As to venial faults, make mention only of those that happen, to come to your mind during, your short examination of conscience, which should not exceed five minutes. 3) With regard to contrition, devote a little longer time to ask it of God and to excite yourself to it, and then you will have it. Should the penitent answer: "I do not feel sorry," the confessor should reply that sorrow to be real need not be felt, since it is an act of the will which has nothing to do with feeling. In certain cases, when scruples are very intense, one must go further and prescribe to the penitent that he limit himself to this generic accusation:

"I accuse myself of all the sins committed since my last confession and of all those of my past life, especially against this or that virtue."

950, 5) Replying to Difficulties. Sometimes a penitent will say to his confessor: You take me for scrupulous, whereas I am not. The confessor will answer: It is not for you but for your confessor to decide that. Are you absolutely sure that you are not scrupulous? Are you calm and at peace after making your confessions? Are you not troubled with such doubts and worries as most persons never experience? You are, therefore, not in a normal state; you are affected with some physical and moral disturbance, and therefore, need special treatment. Obey without argument, and you will be cured; otherwise your trouble will only be aggravated.

By this and other like means one finally succeeds, with God's grace, in curing this distressing malady of scruples.

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