

A SPIRITUAL CURE FOR SCRUPULOSITY¹

ONE of the cases of spiritual direction, which most frequently arises in the increasingly strenuous life of our age, is that of scrupulosity. The nervous tension, caused by the irritating atmosphere of great cities, is obviously conducive to psycho-neurotic troubles; and, if a rigorist educative influence saddles a hypersensitive temperament afflicted by these troubles, with the result that religion is misconceived as a repressive legalism, the effect will almost inevitably be a false conscience perhaps for ever paralysed by scruples. Whenever it makes its appearance and for the same reasons, this disease either suddenly breaks out in a violent crisis or gradually spreads in a slow, consuming progression. Much has been written about this malady: descriptions of the disorder, descriptions of the supernatural trial, the attitude to be taken towards the scrupulous by confessor and director, psychotherapeutic treatments or others in obstinate and disconcerting cases. It would seem that nothing has been overlooked and that the subject is therefore exhausted. One is tempted to conclude: the whole question has been settled once and for all. Nevertheless the scrupulous remain. It is in the West among Latins that scrupulosity is found in its endemic state, whereas it is unknown among Eastern Catholics and Orthodox . . .'

From the earliest Christian times until the second half of the Middle Ages, at which epoch the 'technicians' in Morals, the moral theologians, made their appearance, one cannot discover any serious traces of this evil in the writings of Fathers, Doctors and Saints.

¹ These are but a few simple notes written by someone who has suffered acutely from this affliction. His testimony has therefore the weight of experience. All the usual remedies were prescribed to him, and he hopes he can say in all truth that he did his utmost to submit to them. He believes that the solution he proposes, which could be called the 'historical solution,' is the most efficacious, because it alone takes account of the whole psychological state of the soul suffering from this terrible disease.—Translated from the French in *La Vie Spirituelle*, Vol. XLII, Supplement pages (141) *et sq.*

The article is printed here not as an example of a general principle of morality, but in order to show how it is possible to modify general principles in the concrete application to a very particular and exceptional case. It deals with the abnormal case and therefore the norm of moral action requires different treatment. The author suggests a treatment.—Ed.

Let us leave aside the historical side of the question; it would require a book. But let us make this point. One would not be very far from the truth if one asserted that the disease of scrupulosity was brought into existence as a result of the juridical element introduced by moral theologians in the directives of the moral life; it is a form of ransom paid by certain souls for the precision introduced by those thinkers to the limits of morality in thought and action.

There have always been psychic and nervous predispositions to this mental disease which have varied with races and civilisations. The shock which, from this psychism, caused the disease to spring up, hardly appears before the sixteenth century; and, not to exaggerate, let us say that it seems to have appeared principally in the Latin world when it had reached the stage of moral theological precision and that it consists in this very precision.

It was in this 'precise legalism' (*jurisme*) which had caused the disease that a remedy was sought. What other course of action could have been taken since this 'precise legalism' covered the whole process of the moral act? In order to liberate the soul in anguish from clogging distinctions, a new and final one was presented to it, 'Ignore negative doubts but take account of positive doubts,' which for the benefit of the uninitiate was thus rendered 'Negligible doubt can be ignored, well-founded doubt must be investigated.' It is precisely about the 'motivation' of uninterrupted doubts that the scrupulous person is most anxious. One must nevertheless admit that such a definitive distinction has sometimes produced a real cure in the case of intellectuals undergoing a temporary phase of scruples, this trial manifesting itself either when they are already formed or concomitant with an intellectual crisis. However, no one can deny that in most cases this remedy is utterly useless.

Others, like St. Ignatius, have indeed more wisely advocated a real psychological training, a bold '*Duc in altum*,' an energetic and persevering '*Agere contra*.' By a judicious choice of rules whose precision is founded upon the principles of systematised morals, the troubled soul is guided and enlightened, under the fatherly guidance of a director whose loving kindness and patience will have to be at times well nigh heroic to see that these rules are consistently accepted and followed. Many remarkable cures have been obtained in this way. The testimony of the many souls who have been brought back to normal Christian life, to an intense interior life and even to sanctity, would witness to the efficacy of this therapeutic method. The best exposition of this method is found in a small work entitled '*L'Ange conducteur des âmes scrupuleuses*.' It is a masterpiece

from both a theoretical and practical point of view, written by a learned moralist who was also a psychologist.

However, this method is one of coercion, the emphasis being laid upon the human striving in its humble co-operation with the divine action, and further the whole process is impregnated with a legal atmosphere. Finally it must be added that it is not always successful. Would it not be possible to seek a spiritual therapeutic method in a totally different direction?

Since the disease did not exist before the advent of the moralist, it would seem that one would only need to tell the scrupulous not to take any account of theological precisions; and in fact this is the advice which is frequently given to nervous young seminarists, 'Study moral theology as if it did not apply to you.'

This advice would seem to be sound; but it has the great drawback of introducing an unfortunate and dangerous dualism in the soul, since the deepest and best grounded aspiration of the scrupulous, which is frequently also his most implicit aspiration, is to be or to return to normal. So perhaps one might do better: namely by greatly modifying the method of teaching morals; but that is another matter. The law exists, it must be taken into account; its existence is beneficial and one must be thankful for it. But the law is one thing, its interpretation quite a different matter. It is useless to think of returning to an age when the spiritual life was almost independent of all canonical legislation and fed freely upon Scripture and Tradition. Fervent and humble souls benefited by this regime, but the majority of Christians grew slack, the impetuous and over-zealous fell into Illuminism, and all kinds of sects flourished.

Canon Law canalised the religious stream of life. That it canalised it without stifling it is a proof of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church of Christ. Nevertheless is it not permissible to wish that the paralysing strictures of legalism might be removed from these sick souls, that the timid, craving for a freedom which is too frequently forgotten, should be placed once more in the full stream of the living waters of grace, for these souls are so frequently held back and immobilised by the theological asperities of canonical strictures, which were providentially established not to afflict weaklings like them, but to prevent the devastating flood of false mysticism on the one hand, and on the other stagnation through quietist indolence.

To bring back these souls into the fulness of life, under the guarantee of the wisdom of tradition, which throughout the centuries has been expressed in canonical legislation, a legislation which is itself the expression of an ardent desire for life since it is nothing less than

the expression of the will of a Mother, the will of the Church : such is the other method for curing the modern complaint of scrupulosity.

Life! But what does that mean, if not the source of Life, daily renewable, the Holy Eucharist, the gift of life? Let the soul which is burdened with scruples come to this source of all life, and to him confide her sorrows, in him find peace, from him receive succour. Unhappily the scrupulous person is too often hindered by fear, by the thought that the Holy Eucharist is the sacrament of the living, not of the dead; and the belief that he is in a state of mortal sin torments him.

In truth the Holy Eucharist is the sacrament of the living; it is impossible to feed the dead, and this point is quite crucial. To be brought back to life must we confess our sins and receive absolution with the right dispositions? We know that it is not so, and that perfect contrition of itself brings back life. But is it equally recognised that perfect contrition is easy, even very easy, for a profoundly Christian soul? For it is psychologically the simple yielding to the attraction of God, the simple sorrow provoked by love, a beginning of a childlike self-surrender to the Father one has left or rejected, a reorientation of one's whole being towards God—Truth, Goodness, Beauty, Love. The whole of this process of conversion extends over an indefinite period of time, it may happen quickly or slowly, and is patient of a greater or lesser intensity, but in its very beginning it is perfect, in virtue of the end to which it tends—God who is all perfection.

Let the scrupulous then without hesitation and with simplicity implore God to convert them to himself, and try to surrender themselves completely to the divine action. Let them cry out for God's forgiveness, opening themselves entirely to the Father's love. Then leaving aside all self-analysis, and without anxiety as to whether they have or have not committed grave sins, can they at last go to Holy Communion?

Before the Council of Trent they could have done so lawfully, only that, since the Lateran Council in 1215, all were under the legal obligation to go to confession at least once a year.³ This is still the practice of certain branches of the Orthodox Church. The reason for this annual confession does not here concern us. By enforcing the confession of mortal sins before Communion the Council of Trent has, as is the case in all legislation, sanctioned an existing tendency, or state of affairs, or better a state of desires (in this case a desire for

³ Cap. 21, 'De annua confessione.'

purification by the wonderfully adapted means of sacramental confession). It did so because this desire was expressed in a more or less ancient custom and also because this custom was contested by a contrary custom which had to be repudiated: at that time the deplorable moral laxity seems to have crept in even to the reception of Holy Communion.

One has to go back long before the Council of Trent, before St. Thomas and the Scholastics, to find a time when confession of mortal sins before Holy Communion was not absolutely necessary. There is, certainly, one passage in St. Thomas where he argues from reason for its necessity under pain of mortal sin; this is, however, only an opinion which was not generally accepted since even the great commentator Cajetan is not quite so strict.

Without being too precise about the date, we can point to a time when it was permissible to approach Holy Communion with perfect contrition but without previous confession. This practice was held to agree with the doctrine of St. Paul (I Cor. xi, 26-32) because the communicant's internal dispositions were thus in accordance with the intrinsic exigencies of the Eucharist, which is a divine food intended for those living in a state of grace. Since the Council of Trent (*cf.* cap. vii) this course of action has been forbidden; a very wise prescription which providentially corrected certain deviations in Christian practice, fostered a greater respect for the Eucharist and still helps to maintain this respect. Are we then brought back to the cold force of law? Far from it, for, as we have already said, law is only the expression of a Mother's will for life. In the case of the scrupulous the legislation which was designed to safeguard the respect for the Eucharist and so to help to preserve the life of grace in the Christian soul, does not achieve its purpose, and as such it might just as well not exist as far as he is concerned.⁴

These souls could then freely and joyfully approach Christ in Holy Communion. They could take hold of him, feed upon him, speak to him, listen to him, and in union with him implore the Father to send the Holy Spirit to fill their souls.

⁴Let there be no misunderstanding as to the meaning of this passage. In legal terminology it might be stated this way: The law is intended for the common good, and there are always individuals for whom it is less opportune. They are not, however, exempt from it for this reason.' In the case of the scrupulous a tacit privilege could be invoked as a kind of generalised 'epikeia.' Is it not in this way that the expression *privilegia scrupulosorum*, found in Prümmer's approved manual, has to be interpreted? Prümmer, O.P., *Manuale Theologiae Moralís*, t. I, ed. 6 & 7, 1931, Friburg, Breisgau, p. 211 (No. 323).

One can scarcely imagine the relief felt by a soul thus replaced in the truth of life. In order to prevent the joy produced by the discovery of this new life being turned into pride, the prescription of the Council of Trent ought to be insisted upon as a requirement of supernatural prudence, and we would even claim that it is only in this spirit that it will be helpfully interpreted. The scrupulous will then have to present themselves to their confessor at regular intervals. They will open themselves entirely to him as to a father, and confess themselves quite simply like children. It would be a mistake to enforce a weekly confession on them. That goes without saying. Even a quiet revision of the moral life reawakens the whole unhealthy psychological outlook which will need to be forgotten for a long time before it disappears. During this long period of 'unknowing' the old ways of thinking must be unlearned and a new, healthy perspective of moral values acquired. But if on the other hand the scrupulous are forced to have recourse to precise details in order to obey an order against which they have no appeal, they will by reaction be plunged into terrible anguish brought about by the fear of badly made confessions and sacriligious communions. The confessor may be able to damp down the more conscious fears, but he will have no control over the deep psychological disturbance. The return of peace is to a great extent a matter of time.

The confession of the scrupulous ought therefore to be rare, perhaps monthly, and preceded by only a short examination. Faced with the psychological impossibility of going into details the scrupulous will be forced to be more synthetic in his examination and confession. For this reason it must be remembered that the scrupulous ought to consider their confessor as their director—as far as possible confessor and director should be one and the same person. Prudence demands that the scrupulous themselves should not have to decide when they are definitely cured; certain types may never return to normality. These in particular should not be left to their own devices. It must be remembered that it is God's will that the illumination of grace should not be divorced from human wisdom. Once the scrupulous can freely approach Holy Communion, it will feed them, comfort them and enlighten them. Nevertheless, they will still have to suffer a great deal from painful hesitancy at the very thought of action, since they view even the most trivial events from a moral standpoint. This moral preoccupation will decrease as they acquire a more healthy attitude towards confession and Communion which are usually the chief sources of anxiety through fear of sacrilege. So long as this fear continues they can do no more than try with great simplicity to cultivate purity of in-

tion. Meanwhile, discussion with their confessor, suitable spiritual reading, short meditations preferably of an affective character at various times during the day, the experience which is essential and can come only with time, the influence of competent people whom Providence brings across their path, all these converging factors cumulatively will have a formative influence on their will. Without compulsion the scrupulous will eventually acquire the habit of making clearer and prompter decisions. We think that by such a method even the most scrupulous could be brought back to health.

It is of the utmost importance if they are to be brought back to health that they should not be left in a legal atmosphere. Their disease consists precisely in living constantly and abnormally in this atmosphere. Just as it is essential that they should not live in an atmosphere which is rich in legal precision, it is equally important that they should not feel cut off from normal life. It may be possible for them to accept such an exclusion out of humility, and that can have only good effects. We all know that God can bring good out of evil; but it is no less certain that Providence intends us to follow the way of truth. To put them in an artificial atmosphere of isolation is a grave psychological error. They need to be placed in the more natural and primitive atmosphere in which our ancestors lived. Their complaint, which is largely the result of contemporary influences, ought to disappear from the very fact of their being put back into that habit of mind. To feel themselves included in the continuous stream of Christian practice reassures and calms them. This is an extremely important point. The scrupulous are merely out of harmony with the actual practice of the West, but not with the whole of Christian practice. They are the victims of juridical precision; history delivers them and restores them to the living reality '*Historia lux vitæ.*'

They are outside actual legislation, but not outside the historical reality. To seek a way out by a juridical interpretation of canons 807 and 856 of the Code of Canon Law is useless for the scrupulous. To argue from the expression *consciuis peccati mortalis* by saying that from a legal point of view the scrupulous cannot be said to be fully conscious of mortal sin, and further that because of their state of mind they are generally incapable of committing grave sins, and lastly to admit that even if they were capable and culpable, this possibility could be ignored in virtue of the principle *lex non curat de accidentibus*—these and other arguments of the kind are useful for the jurist; but for the scrupulous they lack the necessary therapeutic value precisely because they are juridical arguments. What is required is that the scrupulous should feel that they are

restored to a psychological outlook which has the virtue of having been really, and historically, the common outlook of all, and which is still the outlook of a great number of Christians of the Greek Orthodox Church and also no doubt of Eastern Catholics, since the code does not apply to them.

These notes could easily lead to laxity if in interpreting them one forgot the spirit in which they were written.

We beg that they should be read with the eye of charity; they presuppose an earnest Christian life and a profound and anxious desire for perfection. This therapeutic method is designed for spiritual progress, for the work of sanctification. It is intended for souls of good will, sincere and true, and desirous of nothing but God. In order to understand them well they ought to be read in an atmosphere of prayer. They seek to be of service for a deepening of spiritual outlook which surely is nothing else than liberation from artificiality and immersion into reality. We have wished to insist upon a desire for that realism, frequently unconscious, which through law seeks to lead to life; this is the secret desire of many minds for whom the beneficent progress of law is considered, not indeed as life itself, but as leading to life.

‘THE FIGURE OF BEATRICE’¹

On his first page Mr. Williams tells us what he has undertaken to study in this book. It is a good statement and may be quoted at length. ‘Beatrice was, in her degree an image of nobility, of virtue, of the Redeemed Life, and in some sense of Almighty God himself. But she also remained Beatrice right to the end . . . Just as there is no point in Dante’s thought at which the image of Beatrice in his mind was supposed to exclude the actual objective Beatrice, so there is no point at which the objective Beatrice is to exclude the Power which is expressed through her. But as the mental knowledge or image of her is the only way by which she her-

¹ *The Figure of Beatrice. A Study in Dante.* By Charles Williams. (Faber, 10s. 6d.).