

SCRUPLES AT CONFESSION (II)

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SOME men in shrift tell a long fit in fair words, as it were a long treatise, and with a dry heart and cold as lead, more by custom than by contrition of heart. Those men though they say mickle they receive not ever in shrift the virtue of the sacrament. And truly againward, there are many simple christian men rough and rude, that when they are touched then loathe their life in sin. They wail and weep if they may, and run to Holy Church for help. And if they would shew their sin fully, scarcely then they shew any so clearly as they would. But they are letted sometime for simpleness, sometime for uncunning and sometimes because they are so sorry and ashamed of themselves that they desire to shew all their sins with the circumstance and they cannot bring them forth. They acknowledge themselves sinful wretches and great sinners, yea and their hearts burn in them for sorrow in so mickle that some greet as if they should melt all in tears or water, and some may not weep for great sorrow, and they have the greater sorrow than the others, for their conscience burns and biteth them as an iron that were left in a wound after a dart or an arrow; they desire tears and they will not come. Trowest thou not that all these then receive the sacrament? Yes truly; they take both the sacrament and the virtue of the sacrament, that is to say forgiveness of all sin, reconciling to God and giving of all grace as it is said before. When thou hast received grace by contrition and compunction, doubt not of the sacrament when thou shrivest thee. But as it comes in the time of the shrift tell it and trow steadfastly, and thy faith shall save thee. Take ensample of the prophet David. He had sinned greatly by adultery and manslaughter. The prophet Nathan came and blamed him thereof and he as fast repented by grace. But he said no more than this: '*Peccavi*', that is to say, 'I have sinned'. And as fast the prophet said on God's behalf, 'Our Lord has put over thy sin', that is to say, he has forgiven thee.

The third doubt is, thou sayest thou didst many sins of old time

¹ Edited by Clare Kirchberger. Cf. LIFE OF THE SPIRIT, April 1956.

and thou hadst no conscience of them as thou shouldst purely, and they are now forgotten and never like to come to mind again, and therefore wot thou never how thou should do. Hear meekly and trow steadfastly. Spring not all the sins that ever thou didst of a root or out of a well and also therein dwell they, that is to say of a wicked and unordinate love of thyself and despite or contempt of God? As Saint Austin says, 'this is the root and the crop of all sin'. It is the root, for of this bud they all.² It is the crop or the fruit for the more they are followed and multiplied, the more waxeth the proper love and contempt of God. Turn then thy love to God and thou art safe, look that the love of God spring in thy heart, by desire of thy salvation and by desire of the lasting life, and increase that love till it come to the despite of thyself and of the world, and then all sins that thou didst if they be forgotten, though thou canst never remember them, they are fully forgiven. For certes when the ground fails of a house it must needs fall, and when the well is stopped the rivers shall wax dry. Our Lord Jesu cannot give half forgiveness, for he forgiveth all. For as the Gospel says, he made the man all whole, not made him half sick, half whole. Trow then in our Lord and thou shalt be all whole. Look busily all the Gospel and thou shalt find that our Lord was ever pleased in the faith of them that were sick and took it to great thanks. He said to Mary Magdalen: 'Thy faith hath made thee safe.' And to another woman: 'Thy faith is great. Be it done to thee as thou wilt.' And to him that lay in palsy: 'Thou trustest well, thy sins are forgiven thee.' And certes since our Lord is so large that he forgiveth all sin known and unknown, forgotten and thought on, Holy Church may not be strait. And Holy Church shall give the sacrament of Christ to all those that our Lord has forgiven sin, if they do that is in their power to shrive them.

To the fourth doubt that thou saidst: thou drest that thy sins are not forgiven thee by contrition and shrift because that thy conscience biteth as sore and sorer after thy shrift, as if it had neither been contrite nor shriven, and thou hopest that it falleth so to thee. Therefore thou art not well shriven yet, for thou trowest if thou mightest shrive thee well and fully of all thy sins thou shouldst then be delivered of biting of thy conscience, and also be siker of the sacrament. To this I answer. Each man that

² Text defective: 'for of the burionys they all'.

sinneth bindeth himself to sin, and also to pain³ that is debted to sin. And both these abide with the sinner till grace be jetted (infused) into the soul. And when grace is come, by very repentance, sin as fast is fully away. But then there is left a debt to pain, unless sorrow for sin were so great that it might wash away both sin and pain. And pain needs to be performed in purgatory or in this life by work of penance assigned in shrift or else wilfully (voluntarily) taken of the biting of conscience of thyself, and also by tribulation and sickness. Trow well that the biting of thy conscience is a great parcel, a part or portion of thy purgatory, for it passes many other sensible pains of this life, for it is as it were a shadow or a likeness of purgatory. This pain of biting of conscience shall all suffer in purgatory of necessity, sharper or more bitter than any creature may feel it here, whilst the soul is in the body. This is also one of the great pains of hell and it is called the worm of conscience, of the which Holy Write saith that the worm shall never die nor that fire shall never be slaked. Nevertheless in purgatory is there siker hope to and full trust that their worm shall die and the fire be slaked, but not in hell. If our Lord then forgive fully the pain of hell, as he does in very contrition and besides that changes the bitter pains of purgatory with the biting of conscience in this life, does he not a great mercy to that man? Yea certes, does he. For this pain here is both shorter and softer and our Lord showeth so both his mercy and his grace and his rightwiseness. Mercy and grace that he changeth so sharp and so grievous a pain of purgatory to another pain softer and shorter. Rightwiseness he sheweth also when he fretteth out of the soul the sinful lust and liking that it had in pride, vain glory, and also in fleshly sins, by a bitter sorrow and biting beforesaid till all the worldly lust and love be fretted out of the soul by this bitter biting of thy conscience. Right as the fire fretteth the iron till it have fretted away all the rust thereof. To this accordeth the Apocalypse and says: As mickle as he has delighted in dainties and lusts as mickle give to him torments and wailings. (Apoc. 18, 7.) Take then this pain with hearty will and thankings to God and comfort thee in steadfast hope of his mercy, for this pain is short and shall soon pass . . . when grace by hating of sin hath cleansed thy ghostly eye.

The fifth, thou sayst thou hast more sorrow that thou canst not

3 Pain here has both the sense of suffering and penance.

shrive thee than thou hast for thy sins. To this I answer that I wonder not thereof, for every man that long time walketh in sin and wallows him therein, he walketh in mirkness, for sin is mirkness. No wonder then if he that long has walked in mirkness when he turneth him to the light perceive the mirkness that he hath gone in. Also he seeth great and he cannot his mirkness that is so know how great it is, for he is far from the light. He that is in that plight needeth to learn two things. One is, it is profitable and needful for him that he know not fully all his sins and the mirkness of them, for a soul new turned might not bear the weight of them, but it would lightly fall into despair. And another [is] that such a man be not over feared nor over sorrowful for he can clearly see all his sins and also clearly shrive him of them. For the desire of ghostly light that is stirred by grace and pricking of conscience maketh him first to feel his mirkness that he is in and knew it not, and the more that he desireth ghostly light and the way of truth, the more painfull shall his mirkness be to him, to the time that the eye of his soul be washed and cleansed by hearty sorrow well continued. And so shall the eye of the soul wax clearer and clearer, and then shall he by light of grace know his sins better than he did before, for then shall he have might to bear the sight of them, and not despair, as lightly he should have done if he had seen the horror of them in his first turning to grace. For siker hope and trust of forgiveness of sin waxeth ever more and more to cleansing of thy ghostly eye and hearty sorrow and misliking of sin. And when hope of forgiveness is waxen well in the heart, what sin that cometh then to mind, casteth not down the soul in despair but stirreth it to hating of sin and sorrow thereof, with a full trust that it is forgiven. Trust that sorrow of thy blindness and mirkness that thou complainest of, in that thou canst not shrive thee as thou wouldst. Thou shalt see⁴ when light of grace and trust of forgiveness is well waxen in thy soul. Beware that thou wallow thee not over heartily in seeking of thy sins and sorrow for pain, for there thine enemy waiteth for to bring thee to despair. Raise up thy heart to comfort in the glad remembrance of mercy of our Lord and his pity and his benefits. Think of thy sin and have sorrow when it is good and needful, but let it not be over long nor over heartily. Walk warily between hope and dread and look that full hope raise up thy heart against despair and

⁴ The word appears to be 'sees'.

look on that other side. Keep thee low from presumption and vain sickness. Two remedies are then wholesome against these floods or waxing or waning of thy wearying⁵ conscience. One is oft moving of the Passion of our Lord. What is so virtuous a plaster to heal all the wounds of thy heart, and to cleanse the eye of thy soul, as that gracious Passion and heartily thinking of these wounds? Full heal of soul is in that Passion; for if thou consider entirely that Passion thou shalt bear lightly all the pains thou sufferest. It shall abate thy heaviness and kindle thy heart to the love of him that for thee vile wretch suffered so mickle woe and shame. Enter into his side by devout meditation and wash there thyself in his heart blood. Dread nought, for our Lord Jesus of his sovereign charity suffered his side to be opened with a spear, for he would that sinners had free and open entry to his heart. The blessed Passion of Christ faithfully within-thought and sweetly shewed is the best and the greatest remedy to a sinful man, and refuge, sweet solace, singular medicine. Therefore where thou lackest merits and good deeds Christ's Passion alone helpeth and strengtheneth if thou set thy trust therein steadfastly. Another remedy against great heaviness of the heart is devout prayer. For so saith Saint Paul: 'If any man be heavy, look ye pray with an even heart and say some psalms.'⁶ An even heart is that which keepeth itself in a good mean between despair and presumption mingled together. With the bitter wormwood of sorrow of his sins and the sweet honey of devout prayer, so counsels our Lord, saying by the prophet: 'I shall put a bridle in thy mouth of loving',⁷ that is a devout prayer, 'then shalt thou not perish', that is to say that thou shouldst not fall to overmuch heaviness, and run ahead as a horse without bridle. I shall bridle thee with the bridle of forgiveness of thy sin, and thereof shalt thou love me, and I shall raise thee by devout prayer for thou shalt find me more ready to forgive thee thy sin than thou foundest⁸ thyself for to sin. Do thou as I say, comfort thyself by the passion of our Lord sometime, and sometime by prayer. Also take again full trust in the sacrament of penance. Jet out thy heart to the priest and tell thy sins in special, if thou sin and they come to mind, and if they come not to mind tell them in general, and that is enough. When

⁵ Perhaps 'wavering'?

⁶ This is St James I, 5, 13, 'aequo animo' (Vulgate).

⁷ Cf. Hosea II, 4.

⁸ 'feyned'.

thou hast received the sacrament trow steadfastly that thou art both shriven and absolved. And if thou feel any stirrings to the contrary that thou art not shriven nor absolved, trow them not, for they are put in thee by a lying angel. And if thou feelest thy conscience biting thee and letteth thee have no rest, yet suffer patiently that biting as thou wouldst suffer a scourging or scouring of thy back, for our Lord's sake, until the time that thou feel a cleansing of sin in thyself. For trow thou fully that beating of thy conscience does more to cleansing of sin than mickle fasting or other bodily penance. For how should the lusty sweetness of sin be better cleansed and more accordingly, than that thou be in lawful bitterness for the same sin that thou wast lusty to sin?⁹

And as touching the seventh article that is set before, that mistrust of thy shrift or the sacrament, and [that] thou goest oft again to shrive of the said sins: to this I give a short answer, for if thou look what I said before, in the first article and as in other places, thou shalt find enough answered thereto. There is no more to say herein. Be well ware of thine enemy the fiend, for right as he beguiled thee by overlarge conscience when thou wast fleshly and worldly, and so drove thee to the snare of presumption of the mercy of God, so would he now, by over strait conscience draw thee to the snare of despair of his mercy. Walk then warily in the right way and go neither on the right hand, by over mickle trust of the mercy of God, nor on the left hand by over mickle heaviness or despair.

It is profitable to some men oft to be shriven of the same sins, for to have more shame and to be stirred the sooner to compunction and to get more grace, so¹⁰ that they by no wise mistrust the virtue of the sacrament, but trow therein, that it fully whiteth¹¹ of sin, as well those that are forgotten in shrift as those that are shriven.

All mighty Jesus by his precious blood stable in grace, strengthen thee in his service, and by the Holy Ghost send thee good counsel, and comfort thee. Amen, Amen, Amen. *Deo gracias. Alleluia.*

*Ingratus domino, fore nescit corde fidelis
Dum sua mandata, frangit in orbe viris.*

⁹ Text obscure; the sense seems to be as given here.

¹⁰ provided that.

¹¹ probably 'quitteth'.