

Are You Scrupulous?

An Interview with Francis J. O'Boyle, S.J.

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"Scruples exist among people of every race," said Father O'Boyle, thoughtfully. "Yet scruples seem to be a disease peculiarly Anglo-Saxon."

We were sitting in Father O'Boyle's private room. From that room, for some twenty years or more, Father Francis J. O'Boyle has been going to class to teach young Jesuits how to hear confessions and care for the problems of human souls. To that room have come literally thousands of men of all classes of society to discuss their mortal (and moral) difficulties. Into that room have been brought tremendous volumes of mail: letters from people seeking solutions for their problems; letters from priests asking expert guidance in the care of their penitents; letters from men and women religious seeking advice for themselves and for the members of their community; letters from troubled men and women who are old, and from disturbed men and women who are still young. Father O'Boyle has left that room a thousand times to give retreats, to hear confessions, to listen to the problems that innumerable men and women have presented to him.

Consultant.

I sincerely doubt that any other priest in the United States has as deep a theoretical knowledge and as wide a practical experience as has Father O'Boyle in all that concerns the problems of human conduct and human souls.

That is why I made the special trip to consult him on the matter of scruples. So many people, I had found, were made unhappy by scruples; so many went through life wretched because of them. And I had come seeking expert advice, advice which would serve as a guide for scrupulous souls and would aid those who must counsel scrupulous souls. Out of the findings of a lifetime of experience and study Father O'Boyle was answering my questions.

American Disease.

"I suppose," said Father O'Boyle, "that there are hundreds of thousands of scrupulous people in our country. Yet I lived and worked for a number of years in Austria and met hardly a single person who suffered from scruples. Recently I was talking to an American priest who worked for some time in Rome. He said that only rarely had he met a scrupulous Italian. Is this scrupulosity one of our national diseases?"

"Perhaps," I ventured, "it is part of our intense American nervousness."

"Perhaps," he agreed. "The surprising thing is that men are more likely to be scrupulous than women. Often, too devout priests and religious are excessively scrupulous."

Not Delicate.

“Now,” he continued, “let’s get this perfectly clear: A delicate conscience and a scrupulous conscience are not the same thing at all. A person with a delicate conscience knows exactly what sin is and shrinks from the slightest approach to sin. The man with a delicate conscience is exactly honest and honourable. The woman with a delicate conscience has a lovely modesty and a purity that make her draw back from even the slightest contact with sin. Such persons know the various kinds of sins and can see clearly the precise distinction between a mortal and a venial sin. When they come to Confession their confession will be marvellously exact. They know what sins they have committed; they confess those sins; they are sorry; but they are untroubled.

“A delicate conscience is a beautiful thing and must never be destroyed. It is right and accurate and correct and is often the sign of high sanity.

“A scrupulous person on the other hand does not really know what sin is, at least in his own case. He is always uncertain. He is troubled with incessant doubt. He cannot be sure whether or not this particular act is a sin. Or, if he knows that the act is a sin, he cannot be sure whether or not he was guilty of it. He thinks that he was guilty, but he isn’t positive. He runs to Confession; he makes a confession that is filled with the retailing of sins he is not certain he has committed; and he steps out of the confessional dissatisfied, uncertain in an agony of fear that his confession has been bad and that his sins are unforgiven.

“That state of horrible uncertainty within the soul is pitiful. And that, I take it, is what you are talking about.”

Unhappy People.

I nodded. This second word picture that Father O’Boyle had drawn was a description of a scrupulous soul such as I had so often met. It was the picture of a troubled man or a troubled woman who sincerely wanted to be good but who was eternally becoming confused about what was right and what was wrong, about how good or how bad was the confession over which he had spent perhaps hours in preparation and other hours in review.

“It’s unfortunate,” I mused, “that religion should cause men and women such pain and unhappiness.”

“Oh,” said Father O’Boyle, “religious scruples are only one form of scruple. There are all sorts of worries with which people uselessly trouble themselves. There are people who become sick with anxiety in their efforts to avoid dirt. (You can, by the way, see a connection between dirt and sin; for physical dirt is to the body something of what sin is to the soul.) Such people always wear gloves lest they be contaminated. They wouldn’t touch a door handle that others have touched, even if they should have to stay in a room forever. Sometimes they’ll bathe ten or fifteen times during a single day, endlessly washing away dirt that isn’t there.

Natural Scruples.

“I’ve known a number of people who had this kind of scruple. They were afraid to kiss a crucifix because they feared that there were germs on that crucifix. They would not kneel down to receive a blessing because they thought their knees might become dirty. A fear of dirt and a fear of germs are forms of physical scruples sadly common among sane people.

“Then there are scruples about health. And again I think you can see the parallel here between the physical and the spiritual. Some people worry for fear their bodies will die; others worry for fear

their souls will die. Health scruples often lead people to eat only one kind of food. The man suffering from scruples about his health feels that he must sleep in a room that has a certain temperature. He believes that he must sleep with his head to the east or to the north or to the south, as the case may be.

“And there are people whose scruples lead them to spend hours adjusting everything in their room before they dare to go to sleep. They must have their shoes at a certain angle. The things on their bureau must be in a sort of regimentation, with the hair brushes and clothes brushes and cushions and gadgets all in an exact line. They cannot go to bed until everything is in order. They are a little like people who have to line up their faults in an over-minute examination of conscience before they dare go to confession.”

“Pathetic,” I commented.

“Very pathetic,” said Father O’Boyle. “So you see, spiritual scruples are just one kind of scruples. But spiritual scruples are infinite in their manifestations. And” — he shook his head a little ruefully — “though they are, as I’ll show you, fundamentally about the same, if you are talking to a scrupulous person and you fail to mention the exact form that his scruples take, he decides that you don’t understand his case. All scrupulous people are really exactly the same in their scruples. But each one thinks he is entirely different from all the rest.”

“What are some of the kinds of scruples?” I asked, thinking of the various types I had encountered.

“Well, there is the person who can’t go to Holy Communion because he thinks he may have broken his fast. Did he swallow a few drops of water with dissolved tooth-paste in its solution when he cleaned his teeth this morning? Did he perhaps breathe in a loose feather from his pillow during the night [or within the prescribed fasting time]? Perhaps he breathed in a tiny gnat on his way to Church?”

Examples.

“I heard of one wife who carried this sort of thing rather far. Her husband worked at night and usually got home shortly after midnight. Like most night workers, he got a sandwich and a cup of coffee on the way home. Well, if this woman was going to receive Communion the next morning, she wouldn’t kiss her husband. She was afraid that some of the coffee or a few crumbs of the sandwich were still on his lips and that she might break her fast. [At that time fasting was from midnight.]

“Sad and stupid, all of this, and entirely against the Church’s explanation of how a fast is broken, but this sort of scrupulous person stays away from Holy Communion for just such silly reasons.”

“St. Ignatius gives the example of a man who by accident steps on two crossed straws that are lying on the ground and then decides that he has trodden on the cross and denied the faith. Such a man is one of the many scrupulous people who, having done by accident something probably not sinful at all, decides that he has sinned. When such a person trips and cries out, ‘O Lord,’ he wonders whether or not he has taken the name of the Lord in vain and whether he now has a mortal sin on his soul. If he accidentally bumps against someone, he decides that he has probably injured that person seriously.”

Other Types.

“There is the person who is terror stricken for fear that he or she (very likely it is she) will set a bad example and will be the occasion of someone else’s sin. You can see the trouble into which such fear would lead a scrupulous person. A man will begin to see possibilities for the misinterpretation of everything he says; he will begin to fear that others are actually misinterpreting what he says. A girl will begin to believe that her most innocent action is a temptation to men, a temptation for which she is responsible. A priest will be afraid that someone in his congregation may be lead into heresy through misunderstanding of his sermon. A mother will decide that she is a bad example for her children. The possibilities of this scrupulosity are endless and terrible. And the Church teaches that a man or woman cannot be guilty of another person’s sin unless he or she deliberately tries to make that person sin.

“Did I? Didn’t I?”

“Then there is the person who can’t be sure whether or not he has fulfilled an obligation. He goes to Mass. But, he asks himself, did he give sufficient attention to the Mass? Lent comes along, and he is constantly torn with trying to decide how much food makes eight ounces. [You’ll recall that this was the recommended quantity to be consumed at the minor meals on a fast day.] He promises to say some prayers in return for a favour from God; he says the prayers over and over and over, and still he isn’t sure that he has said them. He can’t decide whether today, which is Wednesday, is or is not an Ember Day. He has no reason to believe that it is, but he is in a sweat of fear that it may be. [Again, you’ll recall that Ember days used to be days of fast and abstinence. Ember Days are the days at the beginning of the seasons ordered by the Church as days of fast and abstinence. They were definitely arranged and prescribed for the entire Church by Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) for the Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday after 13 December (Saint Lucy), after Ash Wednesday, after Whitsunday (or Pentecost), and after 14 September (Exaltation of the Cross).]

“He says: ‘Did I intend to do this?’ That’s another question that the scrupulous person is always asking himself. The scrupulous priest can’t say Mass. He vests, goes to the foot of the altar, and then, when he gets there, can’t be sure that he intended to say Mass. Why in the world would he be vested and standing at the foot of the altar unless he intended to say Mass?”

I was reminded of the story of the scrupulous priest who used to stand at the foot of the altar and grit his teeth as he made his intention. “Volo missam celebrare” (I wish to say {or celebrate} Mass), he would say, grimly. Then one day it occurred to him that there were two Latin verbs which had the form volo as one of their possible forms. There was the form volo which has the infinitive velle, meaning to intend, to wish, and consequently volo means I intend or wish. But the same word volo whose infinitive is volare (to fly) means I fly. That realization threw him into consternation.

“Suppose God thinks that I am saying, not, ‘I intend to say Mass’, but ‘I fly to say Mass’?”

After all, if he were flying to say Mass, he must want to say Mass. But that thought never occurred to him; he was taking no chances that things were perfectly clear to God. From the time of that realization he would say at the foot of the altar, “Volo missam celebrare,” and add immediately, “By that I mean volo — velle, not volo — volare.” And even then he wasn’t sure that God understood.

Duty Worries.

“There are all the various kinds of worries about duty,” Father O’Boyle continued. “This mother who slaves from morning to night for her children decides that she is really not fulfilling her obligation to them. This man who sees a young woman that he thinks is pretty considers himself disloyal to his wife. The priest won’t say Mass because he is afraid he has not picked up from the

corporal all the particles of the Host. This doctor stops practising because, even though he has been tireless in working for his patients, he feels that he is to blame for the death of a patient.

“To people like this, God seems like a frightful taskmaster who waits hungrily for poor human mistakes and then like an ugly monster jumps out with a roar of triumph when human strength has failed or human limitation has stood in the way of perfection. These people are rather hard on God, aren’t they?”

Mortal or Venial?

“Then there is the large class of people who can’t decide what is a mortal and what is a venial sin. They hear a vulgar remark. Have they sinned mortally? They mention that some friend of theirs has dyed her hair. Have they committed a serious sin of gossip and scandal? They remember that when they were youngsters they stole a quarter from the teapot in which mother kept her small change. Was that a mortal sin?”

“And so on, without limit.”

Father O’Boyle sighed.

“You say you are putting this into a booklet, this talk with me?” he asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

He shook his head.

“I ought to go giving case after case of scruples,” he said. “Because I warn you: If anyone reads this booklet and doesn’t find his particular kind of scruple mentioned in detail, he’ll decide the booklet is of no use to him. He’ll decide that I couldn’t understand his case.”

“Well,” I asked, rather flabbergasted, what can we do about it?”

“Just hope that we can make clear to them that fundamentally all scruples are the same.”

Physical Side.

But before he could do this, I changed the subject slightly.

“What causes scruples?” I asked.

“Nobody really knows,” he answered. “And medical science has discovered almost nothing about them. Some few things we do know, however. Youngsters may have been given incorrect instruction. They may have been told, or think they were told, that omitting the saying of their morning and evening prayers is a mortal sin. They may have heard that it is a mortal sin to say ‘damn’.

“One man who consulted me thought that he was abnormal because impure pictures entered his mind. He had heard that impure thoughts were sinful. Nobody had explained to him that impure thoughts are wrong only when they are desired, liked, and deliberately harboured. When I explained this to him, it was if a weight dropped from his shoulders. He had started life with false instructions.

Run-down.

“Scruples are often a sign of run-down physical or nervous conditions. Scruples often come when a person’s resistance is weakened by disease or overwork or a nervous collapse. A doctor or a nerve

specialist is the one to handle such cases. The person who has scruples and knows he is not well would be wise to consult a reputable and understanding Catholic doctor.

“Scruples sometimes come to people who have been living for a while and have been thinking much too much about themselves. If a man or a woman start digging into the past, trouble is almost certain to result. Too much introspection, too, much useless self-examination, may easily lead to scruples. A healthy, normal life with the right amount of association with other people is an excellent preventive for scruples.

“There are, I’m sorry to say, some pretty badly written spiritual books that have contributed to the existence of scruples. Those books will say for example, that a person can commit sin without knowing it. The authors shake gory locks as they declare that a man does not know whether he is worthy of love or of hate. They stress sin and evil and omit God’s love and mercy and forgiveness. People who are even slightly inclined to scruples have no business reading books like that. Such books are, as a matter of fact, bad for even unscrupulous people.”

Thinking versus Willing.

As Father O’Boyle hesitated for a moment, I asked him about the nature of those elements which make all scrupulous people pretty much the same. I was interested in that phrase. I felt it was an important point for those who deal with scrupulous people.

“Well,” I asked, rather flabbergasted, what can we do about it?”

“Just hope that we can make clear to them that fundamentally all scruples are the same. And I’ll prove it.”

“The first element to be considered in cases of scruples,” said Father O’Boyle, “is that the scrupulous person simply cannot distinguish between his thought and his will. Let me show you what I mean.

“Thought is not free. Will is free. Somebody says to me, ‘Two and two make four’, and whether or not I want to, I have to agree. But somebody says to me, ‘Let’s go down to the corner and rob a bank’. I am free to say yes or no; the choice is entirely up to me.

“What is true of things that are said to me is equally true of my thoughts, my sight, my hearing my imagination. I happen to be looking through a shop window and see a display of indecent pictures. Nothing in the world can prevent my seeing those pictures, and nothing can prevent my imagination from registering the image of those pictures. A man who is with me makes a smutty remark. Nothing can prevent my hearing that remark. My thoughts are not free. My eyes, my ears, and my imagination have to react to external forces.

“But my will is free. The image of the indecent pictures has registered on my mind. Is that a sin?

“Certainly not. It’s no more a sin than if those indecent pictures were reflected in a mirror. The eye registers images on the imagination because that is the function of the eye; a mirror reflects objects because that is the function of a mirror. Neither case involves sin. Nor is it a sin for my mind to register the dirty, smutty remark, carried to it by my ears. I am not to blame any more than the wax disc of a Dictaphone is to blame for the remarks registered on it. The wax disc commits no sin. Neither do my ear and my brain.

“But now my will enters in. My will can say, ‘I like these indecent pictures. I’m going to stand here and feast on them and excite myself emotionally’. Or my will can say, ‘Even though I feel powerfully attracted to these indecent pictures, I know it is wrong to continue to look at them, and I shall walk away’. In the first case I am consenting to sin. In the second case I have made the temptation an opportunity for virtue, and, far from committing sin, I am actually winning merit for heaven.

What Happened After?

“What I saw, my eye’s reaction to what I saw, and the reaction of my brain — these in themselves were neither sinful nor sinless. They were automatic, without freedom. The action of my will AFTER these automatic processes was what mattered.

This same distinction holds with regard to thoughts that enter my mind. I do not have any real responsibility for their coming and their going.

“I am sitting in an automobile and looking out the window. Suddenly I realize that my mind is filled with indecent images. Is that sinful? No more sinful than if I had sneezed because specks of dust had blown into the car and into my nose. I am not responsible for the thoughts that came into my mind, as I would not have been responsible for the dust’s blowing into the car.

“Someone has done me an injury. Suddenly I find myself thinking, ‘I’d like to kill that person.’ Is that a sin? Not yet. That’s just a thought that came to me without my desiring it. It is no more a sin than a cold in the head is a sin.

“I hear a man say, ‘I don’t believe in God’, or ‘The Catholic Church is an evil institution’. That statement registers in my mind. Am I guilty of heresy? No more than a Dictaphone would be if the man spoke that phrase into it. I didn’t seek that thought; it came automatically. The fact that I have heard the statement and even reacted to it does not in any sense constitute a sin.

Distinguish!

“I have found case after case where a person is scrupulous because he makes no distinction between thought, which is not free, and will, which is free. He believes that because he has seen or heard or thought something indecent, he has committed a sin. The fact of the matter is that sin is possible only when the will turns to that something and says, ‘I like this. I’m going to hold on to it’.

“Is that condition of will ever present in scrupulous people? Never! That is why the matters about which they scruple are never sinful for them.”

“But,” I protested, “those people aren’t sure that they didn’t consent to the sight, or the sound or the thought. Perhaps the thought was very attractive. Perhaps they really liked it. Perhaps it caused a pleasurable reaction. And then they became disturbed and worried. They don’t know whether or not they consented to the thought. And if they consented, it would, you see, in their view, be a serious sin.”

Father O’Boyle laughed.

Not Certain! No Consent.

“One really shouldn’t laugh at what is such a tragedy to well intentioned people, but the answer is really so terribly simple: If you are not certain about your consent, you do not consent.

“In everything except scruples that distinction is easily seen,” he continued. “A man stands by while a murder is being committed. Believe me, he hasn’t the slightest doubt about whether or not he consented to that murder. You are the defendant in a trial; into the court is brought a contract. ‘Did you consent to this contract?’ the judge asks you. You are sure, I’ll wager, whether or not you consented to it. A charming young man asks a girl for her hand. She does not go around asking herself, ‘Did I say yes or did I say no?’ She is certain that she either rejected the young man or accepted him. And if she put him off, as perhaps she did, she knows that she did not accept him. And does the young man have any uncertainty of her answer?”

When Does Sin Enter?

“Now comes the question of temptation to mortal sin. Let’s say that an indecent but attractive picture flashes through a man’s mind. Later, when he recalls having had that thought, he asks himself whether or not he consented to it.

“It is the clearest thing in the world; if he consented, he knows that he did, and that is all there is to it. Or let’s say that he fought it away and vigorously said no; then he knows for a certainty that he did not consent to it. But if he remembered only that he was very confused and muddled and excited at the thought, that he liked the temptation and yet knew it was a sin, that he wanted to accept it and yet felt that he must not do so, that in the end his mind was spinning around in circles, what then?

“The answer is very clear-cut: If he is absolutely sure that he was not absolutely sure, then he was not sure at all. And if he was not sure whether or not he consented, then he didn’t consent.

“And the person with scruples just has to say, ‘If I am not absolutely sure whether or not I consented, I did not consent’.”

Look Out for the Lion!

I recall a comparison I have often used in dealing with scrupulous people. Mortal sin is something big and terrible, as terrible as a devouring lion; there is no mistake about it. Mortal sin does not creep up on one as would a gentle lamb shyly thrusting its cool nose into one’s hand.

So when someone comes to me and says: “I don’t know whether or not I have committed a mortal sin,” I counted with this parallel: — “Suppose a girl rushed into a classroom and cried out to the teacher and to the students, ‘Oh! As I was coming down the corridor, I think I ran smack-bang into a roaring lion’. Some of the students might be a little excited for a moment. But most of them, the sensible ones, would laugh. And the teacher’s reply would be very definite: ‘My dear, if you only think you saw a lion, believe me, you didn’t see a lion. A roaring lion dashing along the corridor would be something absolutely unmistakable’.”

And if a person only thinks that he has committed a mortal sin, only thinks that he has admitted the devil and the hosts of hell into his soul, then he didn’t commit a mortal sin. The devil, like a roaring lion that seeks whom it may devour, doesn’t creep quietly and unobtrusively into the soul. The soul immediately knows when it has admitted so terrible a thing as mortal sin.

I repeated Father O’Boyle’s phrase slowly.

“If I am not absolutely certain whether or not I consented, I did not consent.”

“If there is any doubt about mortal sin, there is no doubt; no mortal sin was committed.”

Father O’Boyle resumed.

“But I do wish people would clearly understand that a physical act, even an act of the mind or of the imagination, is neither right nor wrong unless we either want it and like it or don’t want it and don’t like it. An act without will is like the twitching of an eyelid or involuntary coughing. My mind and my imagination can be guilty of sin only when my will approves, accepts, and calls into action a sinful thought or image.”

“That should,” I suggested, “be relatively simple and clear.”

If I will not to sin,

If I will to sin not

Then I do not sin

“That should,” I repeated, “be relatively simple and clear.”

Stubborn.

“And so it should be,” said Father O’Boyle, “if it were not for the second element or factor to be considered in almost all cases of scrupulosity. Scrupulous people are terribly stubborn. They take the stand that they are right and you are wrong; they understand themselves better than you could ever understand them; their decision, though it be ever so crackbrained, is more reasonable and logical than your decision, than even the decision of God. And the truth of the matter is this: What they regard as decisions are really fears.

“It is startling how often good people, very good people, will cling to these absolutely false fears in spite of all argument and evidence to the contrary. Obstinacy is really the nurse and guardian of scrupulosity. And obstinacy is a hard, hard thing to deal with.

“A person who is suffering from scruples really has no conscience at all. Whoever he is, however brilliant or well educated, he has lost the power of judging his own case. He no longer knows right from wrong.

“In his calm moments he can see how utterly mad and stupid his scruples are; he can give the proper evaluation to the same scruples in someone else; he can even laugh at other peoples scruples.”

The good priest now gave an illustration.

“I knew a particular fellow once, and I knew his confessor. The man himself told this story against himself, years after he was finally cured by the sort of remedy I’ll shortly outline. The man was convinced that his soul would be lost unless he weighed exactly two hundred and twenty pounds. As he was a man of rather slight build, he considered his chances of salvation pretty slim. His confessor decided to handle the case in this way: He said to the scrupulous man, ‘Suppose you heard a man say that he would be lost unless he could make his hair curl. What would you think?’

‘I’d think that man was a little daft.’

‘Suppose you heard a woman say that she would go to hell unless she grew to be seven feet tall?’

‘I’d say she needed an analyst.’

‘Suppose you heard a man claim that there was no hope of eternity for him unless he shrank to ninety-eight pounds?’

‘He certainly needs a doctor and a priest.’

‘Suppose a man told me that he was sure to lose his soul unless he weighed exactly two hundred and twenty pounds?’

“The man hesitated.

‘He would probably be a little mad. However’ — he looked up slowly — ‘in my case, you see, it is a fact; I have to weigh two hundred and twenty pounds’.”

Fear.

Father O’Boyle was right. The so-called decisions of scrupulous people are really fears. If it were only a matter of false judgement, ignorance, misinformation, or faulty reason, it would be relatively simple to handle. One can meet false judgements with correct judgements. One can erase ignorance with knowledge. One can cancel misinformation with actual facts, can beat down faulty reason with convincing reason. But when we are dealing with scruples, we are dealing with fear. The scrupulous person has no convictions; he has only fears. He doesn’t know with certainty; he only dreads. He has no reason for his fears, at least no reason that cannot be answered; but he shrinks in terror from some possibility or thought of course of action. He is afraid to make any decision. His life is one continuous ‘jitters’.

Not Alone.

Helping a scrupulous person, then, means helping him to rid himself of his fears. And fear often arises from being alone. One is most afraid when one is alone. When a trusted friend enters the supposedly empty house with us, our fears vanishes. When we are walking alone along a dark street, we tremble at the sight of approaching figures, but if we are walking with a dear friend, someone in whom we have confidence, the approaching figures no longer terrify us.

I recalled a startling case of this kind.

So the scrupulous person can conquer his fears through a trustworthy guide, a priest who is willing to laugh at the absurdity of his fears. Alone, a scrupulous person sees the world filled with perils. But when he comes to realize how full the world is with God’s love, how close is Christ, how dear is his soul to the Sacred Heart, and how trustworthy is the priest in whom he confides, fear vanishes, and most scruples vanish with that fear.

All Muddled.

“Yes,” said Father O’Boyle, “it’s surprising how scrupulous people lose their ability to judge. I’ve known brilliant people who gave perfectly correct advice to others yet couldn’t decide for themselves the simplest matters of right and wrong.

“The fact is this: Whatever the type of scruples they have, scrupulous people must realize that they have no conscience in their own regard.”

“That.” I suggested, “puts them in a rather terrible situation, doesn’t it?”

“In a way, yes. Unless they clearly recognize that fact and substitute a correct conscience for their false one.

“Which conscience they are to get from a confessor. That is the one salvation for a scrupulous person. He must recognize the fact that for the time being he is incapable of judging his own

conduct. He cannot distinguish between right and wrong in his own actions. He is so muddled and confused by the distress of his mind and his continual struggle to make decisions that he must receive some guidance.”

“He is a little like an aviator,” I suggested, “who suddenly realizes that his instrument board has failed him. The compass is spinning around madly. He doesn’t know north from south. He has only one way of getting his ship back to land.”

“Correct,” said Father O’Boyle “He has only one way of knowing north from south. He has to find the radio beam that is sent out from the landing field. He has to clamp on his earphones and take his directions from the voice that comes to him out of the air. His instruments have betrayed him. If he follows them now, he is lost. But if he follows the radio beam, if he obeys the message that comes to him over the wireless, even though he is flying through fog, he is safe.”

“He flies blind.” I suggested.

“Yes. And the scrupulous person, knowing clearly that the instruments which God gave him, his conscience, is for the time not normal, must fly blind too. He must listen to the voice that comes to him out of the air, the voice of his confessor. And though he flies through fog, so long as he obeys that voice and follows those directions he is absolutely sure of making a safe landing.”

Honest Admission.

I was silent for a minute. After all, that seemed a great deal to ask of any person — the blind acceptance of someone else’s conscience for his own. I suggested this to Father O’Boyle.

“That is why a scrupulous person must be made to face calmly and honestly the fact that he is scrupulous,” Father O’Boyle answered. “When a confessor asks, as confessors will ask soon after a scrupulous person has begun his confession, ‘Are you scrupulous?’ it would be well for the penitent to face the situation frankly and then accept the confessor’s diagnosis.

“No patient likes to be told that he has this problem when the doctor gives him such a diagnosis, he insists that he has no such disease. The patient’s cure begins when he faces the fact that he has the disease and meets the doctor with a trusting ‘All right, doctor. What do you think I ought to do?’

“So when the confessor says, ‘You are scrupulous’, the penitent would be wise to say simply, ‘I understand. I put myself in your hands. What do you think I ought to do?’

“From that point on the penitent must follow with implicit faith the prescriptions of the priest.

“That penitent has this great consolation: The priest is God’s representative in his regard. The voice of the priest is for him the voice of God. When the priest prescribes God approves. And the penitent has no further responsibility in this matter.

“More than that, if there were any error in the directions given by the priest, the responsibility would rest entirely with the priest; the penitent would in no way be to blame.”

“But,” I objected, “wouldn’t that error implicate the penitent? If the priest gave him incorrect advice, the priest would be guilty of sin, and the scrupulous person would have been the occasion of that sin.”

Trained to Handle Scruples.

Again Father O’Boyle laughed.

“That needn’t worry him at all. In the first place, the priest has been taught to handle scruples. It is not very likely that he will advise the penitent to do what is wrong. And even if his advice were wrong, the priest would be giving that advice in the belief that it was right; God does not punish a man who has committed a wrong action if that man believed that his action was right. God will not allow the priest, who is taking His place in soothing the anguish of a troubled soul, to make mistakes.

“The scrupulous man and the scrupulous woman need only submit to the advice of the priest. Let the priest decide. Do what he tells you to do. His conscience is for the time your conscience. You can fly blind. God will bring you safely home.

“The very first thing a scrupulous person should do is decide on a spiritual adviser, a priest who is understanding yet firm. He should state his case as honestly as possible and then do just as the priest tells him to.”

“He Doesn’t Understand.”

“That’s all fine,” I said; “but suppose the priest doesn’t understand? All scruples aren’t the same. And all scrupulous people aren’t the same. The problem of each is an annoying disease. But he’s a fool, if an individual one, and it requires a deal of careful explaining.”

Father O’Boyle smiled just a little wearily.

“You talk almost like a scrupulous person,” he said. “It’s odd, but scrupulous people are unconsciously and blamelessly a little conceited. Each one thinks his case is so terribly different from any other case; his problem is one that has never had a precedent; he will have to explain his case for hours before the priest will understand it.”

“Well,” I demanded, “isn’t he right?”

“If there is anything in the world that is stereotyped, it’s scruples. A few minutes of explanation tell me all I need to know about the most complicated case. And when I or any other experienced priest says to a scrupulous person ‘I understand now. You’ve made it perfectly clear’, that person can be absolutely sure that I do understand and that nothing he could add would make his story any clearer.”

“So the sure cure for scruples is.”

“Obedience, obedience, and more obedience,” said Father O’Boyle. “Select a priest confessor, go to him, and do exactly what he tells you to do. That is the only cure. The scrupulous person must substitute the priest’s correct conscience for his own incorrect conscience. And he must do this even when he is afraid that the priest may be wrong.”

“Well,” I said, bringing this into the realm of the personal, “suppose a scrupulous person came to you. How would you proceed to cure him?”

Conscience Gone Haywire.

“First,” said Father O’Boyle, “I would explain to him why he must implicitly accept my conscience for his own. His conscience is absolutely wrong; in his calm moments he knows that; when he decides for others, those very decisions prove to him that his own attitude is incorrect. He must let my conscience substitute for his own.

“Then he must come to Confession comparatively rarely. If he permits himself to be forever running to Confession, he will drive himself mad. God asks of a penitent only this: a decent effort to make a good confession. And I am the one to decide whether or not the confession is good.

“Between confessions, under no circumstances should he examine his conscience. He must tell himself, almost with a laugh, that he has no conscience to examine. He must fly blind.

“When he is in doubt about anything — is this right or wrong? — he must tell himself that it is right.”

Go Ahead!

“Just a moment,” I interrupted. “Aren’t you going a bit too far? Suppose this penitent of yours has a chance to steal fifty dollars. Aren’t you practically telling him to take it and to tell himself that he is right in that action?”

Gesturing with the pipe, Father O’Boyle all but brushed the question aside.

“You didn’t listen very closely,” he said, smiling tolerantly. “Is it mortal sin to steal fifty dollars?”

“Under ordinary circumstances, yes.” [This is 1938. Fifty dollars was a LOT of money. In the U.S the average wage was about \$30 per week and the minimum wage was about \$17 per week.]

“Any doubt about it?”

“Certainly not.”

“Well, then,” said Father O’Boyle, “there’s no case for a scruple there. I can’t have a scruple about an external act that I know for certain is a sin. A person kills a man, robs a bank, burns a building; these are all clearly external, objective acts; I know for certain that they are evil, very evil.

“The scrupulous person becomes confused about things that happen within himself. He can’t decide whether or not he consented to a certain thought and whether he was right or wrong if he did consent. It is in such cases of doubt that he must tell himself that he is right, that he has not committed a sin.”

“Am I supposed then, to give that advice to all my penitents?”

Communion the Cure.

“Certainly not. That advice holds only for scrupulous people, who cannot resolve their doubts, whose inclination is to see sin where there is no sin. That advice is for them alone; to them alone I would say, ‘When in doubt, go ahead’.”

“I see. This advice is for their cases only.”

“Then I would advise them to go to Holy Communion regularly.”

“Even when they think that they may have mortal sin on their soul? Even when they are afraid they have broken their fast or caused others to sin seriously?”

“Exactly. Under all those circumstances they are to receive Holy Communion.”

Father O’Boyle looked a little wistful. “If scrupulous people would only do that much, would receive Holy Communion no matter how they feel, half their struggle would be over, and their cure would be at least half accomplished. But they, who need the divine physician so badly, stay away

from Him. And He, who loves to help them, cannot reach out and give them the help they need so badly. Holy Communion under all circumstances, however great their trouble and worry and doubt — that's the great forward step towards the cure of scrupulous persons.

So Good!

"I've known literally thousands of scrupulous people," he continued, "and their predominant characteristic is their virtue. They lead sinless lives. In fact, it is their very dread of sin that makes them struggle against even the suggestion of sin and quail in terror at even the thought of temptation; it is this overdrawn dread that gives them scruples. They have thrown up around themselves barriers so strong that sin cannot possibly get through to capture their souls. I find that in case after case people who are scrupulous have never committed a mortal sin. They have led stainless lives. And yet they torment themselves needlessly, pitifully, horribly.

"I want to say to every scrupulous soul in the world: 'Do you think you would be scrupulous if you were not trying so very hard to please God? Do you think that you could dread sin so much if you were not in God's grace? This fear that you have of sin is your greatest assurance that there is no sin in your life. You'd not hate sin this way if you were sinful. You hate it because you are sinless. You worry about it because you want to be good. You are scrupulous simply because you are so terribly afraid of losing your own soul and the love of God'.

Convinced They're Not.

"I have never met a really scrupulous person who was not a very good person.

"But alas! You can't convince them of their goodness. They consider themselves the lowest sinners. And when you try to tell them that they are good, they answer, 'That may be true in someone else's case, but it's not true in mine'. You see, even there they can't depend on their own conscience.

"Certainly God meant them to be happy. They deserve happiness. Why should an absolutely false view of life come between them and their joy of living?

"And it is a false view. They live in constant fear that they are going to sin or that they have already sinned. I want to make them see that that very fear is the guarantee of their sinlessness.

"Forced to Sin."

"They feel that they are physically forced to sin, that they are not free. 'Forced to sin', 'not free' — those very terms are contradictory. If a man is forced to sin, he is not guilty of that sin, He can sin only by freely choosing to sin. If it is pressure that drives him to sin, he is not guilty. A murderer forces a dagger into my hand and forces me to kill someone. Though the blood spurt upon my hands, I am still guiltless. Similarly, the very fact that I am forced to register an indecent thought is no sign that I am guilty.

"Scrupulous people become over-excited about their temptations, temptations which come to every man and woman. Every normal man and woman has thoughts of impurity; every human imagination is subject to images, to life-like spontaneous emotions and sometimes pictures and feelings which on reflection turn out to be vile. We are no more responsible for those images than is the silver screen on which the operator throws a picture. And so long as we do not want these images and do not accept them, we are as guiltless as is a sheet of silver-stained canvas.

“The scrupulous person simply thinks that he is unique. He fails to distinguish between temptation and sin. He cannot be made to realize that everyone has such temptations, that the greatest saints who ever lived had them, that temptations are merely signs that a normal adult is part animal and part angel. Scrupulous people torment themselves about things which are no more sinful than a cold in the head. How sad that such good people should permit themselves to be needlessly and continuously unhappy!”

“Would you mind,” I asked, “summarizing all this? I think it would be simpler if the whole matter were reduced to a sort of synopsis.”

In Brief.

And here is the synopsis:

“America is, perhaps because of the nervous American way of living, filled with scrupulous people.

“Scruples may take various forms; some are natural scruples, such as the fear of dirt or sickness.

“A delicate conscience knows the distinction between good and evil; a scrupulous conscience is mistaken in its judgements on good and evil. Though scruples take many forms, they are all fundamentally the same. Each scrupulous person is persuaded that he is unique. But he is not. He is like every other scrupulous person.”

“Fundamentally they all fail to distinguish between temptation and consent. They do not see that the senses and the imagination and the intellect are not free. What happens through sight or hearing or imagination or thinking is often quite beyond control. Actions become good or bad only when our will enters in and we accept or reject, approve or disapprove, cling to or throw aside.”

And Then —

“If there is any doubt about consent, if we are not absolutely sure whether or not we consented, we did not consent.

“People with scruples are incapable of judging their own cases; it is as if they had no conscience at all.

“Hence they must accept the conscience of a priest director. Obeying his voice, which is in their regard the voice of God, they must fly blind. They must realize that their cure can come only through obedience, obedience and more obedience.

“They must go to Confession seldom; between confessions they must not examine their conscience; they must go to Holy Communion even when they are in doubt about mortal sin on their souls.

“If they are physically run-down or nervous, they should consult a good doctor.

“Their scrupulosity should be, not a source of unhappiness, but a kind of guarantee that they are in God’s grace. They would not be worried about sin if they did not hate sin. They would not be so anxious to stay in God’s grace if they were not safe in their love of God.

“God wants them to be happy. And if they go to Him humbly in Holy Communion, He will give them the happiness they deserve.”

He Loves Us.

That concluded our interview. Father O'Boyle returned to his classes of young Jesuits, his stacks of correspondence on moral problems, and the countless people who come to him for help.

Yet in his last comment was a thought that should be a great source of consolation to any man and any woman suffering from scruples. God wants them to be happy.

That really says it all. God, our God, is not the ancient Jewish God of wrath and vengeance; our God is our Father who is in heaven; He is the Christ who loved us from the mount of Calvary and awaits and watches among us in the tabernacle of the altar; He is the Holy Spirit, who chose as His favourite dwelling place the hearts and souls of His creatures.

God wants for us far, far more happiness than we could desire for ourselves. Christ piled parable on parable in His effort to persuade us of His love and His desire and His ceaseless quest for souls. He was Christ, the father of the prodigal son; Christ, the Good Shepherd; Christ, searching for the lost piece of silver; Christ, the Good Samaritan; Christ, who on earth lived to the full His own test of love, for He laid down His life for His friends.

Our God is the God who welcomed back the repentant Peter and gave him the great triple opportunity to wipe out his triple denial by a triple assertion of love. He is the God who lifted the sinful Magdalen from her sin and transported her from her cheap, sinful loves to the ecstasy of a love that was divine.

He wants us much more than we want Him. He has done everything to convince us of His mercy, which is above all His works, and of His love, that surpasses understanding, and of His forgiveness, that could reach out to a thief upon the cross and to an Apostle, the chief of His chosen few, who denied Him in His hour of need.

If Peter Had Scruples.

But can you imagine Peter, after Christ had forgiven him, running about in feverish and perturbed fashion and saying: "I wonder if I made it clear to Christ. I wonder if He understood me when I said I love Him. Maybe He didn't really forgive me. Maybe I wasn't sorry enough. Maybe my Confession was not complete?"

Wouldn't we feel that Christ would have been justified in being a little annoyed, to use a very human word, by the fact that Peter simply refused to be persuaded? Christ would necessarily have been hurt had Peter said: "Lord I really am not sure that you love me enough to forgive."

Yet a scrupulous soul runs around in precisely that sort -of fashion, questioning, rehearsing, repeating, asking Christ again and again for assurances and reassurances, in a sense doubting Christ, who is far, far more eager to forgive than we are to be forgiven.

Magdalen.

And you can imagine Magdalen, after Christ had lifted her to her feet, getting a bad attack of scruples? Can you fancy her saying: "I'm not sure whether or not Christ understood all the details of my sin. Perhaps I didn't make them clear to Him. I wonder whether I expressed my love clearly enough?" And then can you fancy her dashing off to Peter and asking him to hear her Confession? Can you imagine her going over the same story again and again and begging to be reassured that Peter understood? Can you see her not satisfied with that and hurrying off to go to Confession to John? And can you see her answering John's "You don't need to go into details, Mary; I really

understand,” with “No, he doesn’t understand; I’d better go and confess to James or maybe to Philip”?

It all sounds so absurd, doesn’t it, But scruples are absurd, just as absurd in any of us, God’s children, as they would have been in those other children of God, Peter or Magdalen.

Christ is never annoyed with us. But if He could be annoyed, I think He would be annoyed with those of us who doubt His love and His willingness to forgive. And we do doubt those lovely and unmistakable qualities in the tender Christ when we cling to false conscience, torture our souls with the senseless torment of scruples, and bring misery to our souls, which Christ intended to be even happy in this world.
