



## Cardinal O'Connor's Homily

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### Are You Scrupulous?

Cardinal urges trust in God's love to overcome a painful spiritual disorder

*This is the text of Cardinal O'Connor's homily at Sunday Mass in St. Patrick's Cathedral March 7.*

My sisters, my brother, my mother, were she alive--any of these--could tell you as can I of what was the ritual in our little house in Philadelphia every single night. My father would ask three questions and insist that they be answered and verified. One, "Was the back door locked?" (The back door locked with a little bolt.) He never asked about the front door. Two, "Has the light in the cellar been put out?" He never asked about lights anywhere else. Three, "Are you sure that all of the jets on the gas range have been turned off?" We heard this night after night when we were kids. But the house never blew up and the electric bill remained reasonable, and no one ever broke in the back door.

Those who are given to such language today would probably call my father a victim of an "obsessive-compulsive disorder." I do not think that he was, but nevertheless it serves our purpose to use this as an example, an example with which many of you, I suspect, are familiar. If you think in terms of such an obsessive-compulsive disorder but add to it a spiritual and, most particularly, a moral component then you have what we call "scrupulosity."

Scrupulosity is so-called because the Latin word *scrupulus* means a sharp little stone. Everyone knows what it is like to have a little sharp stone in

a shoe. It can be the most expensive pair of shoes in the world, but that little stone ruins everything. You might be able to walk for miles, but it is killing you all the time. It is like having a tiny little speck in your eye. It's a scrupulus, a tiny, little, sharp stone. Those who experience scrupulosity experience this tiny, little, sharp stone, as it were, in their consciences, in their very beings, which keeps them constantly anxious, constantly concerned and, above all, constantly afraid. This is why we are reflecting on scrupulosity this morning.

At the beginning of Lent we said that we would be speaking of forgiveness and reconciliation on each of the Sundays of Lent. This is one of the main purposes of Lent: forgiveness and reconciliation given to us by the magnificence of the sacrifice of Christ, his crucifixion and death on the cross that brought about the resurrection. We all seek forgiveness, and during Lent we petition, most particularly, for forgiveness of all the sins of the past and for reconciliation. But most of us do this without a constant gnawing or overwhelming fear.

Those of us caught up in scrupulosity honestly believe that forgiveness is impossible for us; God himself can not forgive us despite the crucifixion of his Son. It is quite conceivable that not one single person in this cathedral, at this moment, needs a reflection on scrupulosity. If so, count your blessings because as any confessor, any clinical psychologist, any psychiatrist can tell us, there are a huge number of people in our culture, even in this highly permissive, highly promiscuous culture, who suffer the terrible burden of scrupulosity. It is quite possible that there is someone here who knows instantly what I am talking about.

Scrupulosity always involves fear: fear of dying without being able to get to confession, fear of not being forgiven by Almighty God, fear of going to hell. If anyone needs an awareness of the mercy, the gentleness, the love, the forgiveness of Almighty God it is a scrupulous person. One might ask, How is it in this highly permissive, promiscuous society in which the media so often set the norm--what we see in the movies, on television often dismiss the very idea of sin, ridicule some of the most sacred beliefs of our faith--how can it be that in this culture people of all ages can experience this pain, this suffering of scrupulosity? You think it

would be exactly the opposite. But it is quite conceivable that because of the permissiveness and the promiscuity of our culture more and more people tighten up so that they feel they must try to protect themselves not only from the culture but from God, himself.

There is a fascinating book on scrupulosity written by a psychologist, William Van Ornum, Ph.D., called "A Thousand Frightening Fantasies." It is a book that some people are finding very helpful. It has been given rave reviews by psychiatrists, psychologists, counselors and confessors. I want to read a few passages that are very illustrative of what I am talking about.

At one point in this book it is said that scrupulosity is like an airport that is always open. That is a good example. No sooner does one airplane leave than another one is ready to take off. No sooner does one airplane come in and land than another one comes along to land. So it is with the person who is constantly worried about some problem of conscience. He or she might get rid of this particular matter, might talk to a priest, might talk to a counselor, to a therapist, to a psychologist but then another problem quickly comes along to take its place.

Dr. Van Ornum did a survey of an organization that you might not know ever existed called "Scrupulous Anonymous." It is much like Alcoholics Anonymous or Over-Eaters Anonymous. He received replies from a thousand people and discovered and verified everything that he had learned in his work. They depicted immense suffering and anguish caused by scrupulosity.

"Perhaps most sad is that 50 percent reported that scrupulosity had a severe or a very severe effect on romance; 54 percent noted a severe or a very severe effect on marriage. ...

"Many people with [scrupulosity] believe they have wasted years. They lost friends, love, time with children, work, recreation and hobbies, and sacramental participation. This is tragic. ..."

So, for example, we read:

"People with [scrupulosity] in the survey expressed loneliness and feeling apart from others. Many never met another person like themselves. Many longed to talk with a kindred spirit."

This is one of the reasons I am talking about this today. So many people hide this moral, this spiritual debility. I am not sure I have ever heard a priest give a homily on scrupulosity, and that I think is unfortunate. One individual said:

" 'I was eleven and everybody was playing baseball, having fun. I knew I was the only kid that was worrying about mortal sin. I wished I could just play and have fun like everyone else. ...' "

"Several respondents reported a predicament when they became engaged. They wondered, 'Should I tell my fiance? How much should I say? Will he [or she] break it off when he [or she] learns'?"

"One respondent reported fears that his friends don't know:

" 'I worry excessively about breaking the Communion fast. When I receive Communion, I worry about particles of the Host remaining on my hand. I worry about bad thoughts. I worry about breaking the Church law about the Sabbath. These concerns take the joy out of my life.' "

One respondent over 80 years old said she "hid her scrupulosity for her entire life."

Another respondent said:

" 'When I go to Mass, I must be perfect. There must be no rips in my clothes. I worry if the priest or deacon does his job right. Is it a valid Mass? The dismissal prayers cause me concern. I worry that the deacon forgot to say "The Mass is ended" or said the words in the wrong order.' "

" [To some perhaps these might sound like foolish fears. To others, as the title of the book says, these are "frightening fantasies."]

"Internally, ...[many people] curse God. ... [They] radiate anger and bitterness toward God. Internally, they curse their condition. They wonder why God selected them for torment. ..."

Another stated:

" 'My image of God is a punishing God. I feel He watches my every move and waits for me to sin. He marks it in a book in Heaven. I cannot escape the punishment I know I deserve.'

"People with [scrupulosity] create rituals...[thinking they] have a magical quality. For instance, by saying a rosary twice they believe God will spare them from sickness. [Often in such cases it is not the devotion with which they pray, it is the numbers that count.] By reciting ten Hail Marys [not nine, not eleven], they feel they can control their anger toward their aged mother who makes daily demands from the nursing home. By going to church every day and three times on weekends, they hope to garner prosperity."

For many of these individuals, numbers are magic.

"One man wrote: 'I must complete a set formula of prayers. I can't talk to anyone until I've finished.' I recently saw one man [says this psychologist] who felt compelled to crack his knuckles five times, but only after he cracked his toes five times. ..."

This is not limited to those of us who are ordinary people. A number of the saints had problems with scrupulosity: the great St. Catherine, St. Alphonsus of Liguori, even St. Ignatius who founded the Jesuits. Here is a very interesting observation that is played out so often. Sometimes people with scrupulosity get so fed up they sin or act out in extreme ways.

"Scrupulosity is like water torture. The constant dripping wears down even the strongest [individual]. When this happens some sufferers rebel. They commit real mortal sins. They get drunk and don't care. [You may see this often. "Everybody thinks I am drinking and if I take one little

drink I worry about it and worry about it so I may as well just get completely plastered." And they do.] This provides short-term diversion, but they feel worse afterward. One respondent offered words of encouragement to others in this situation: 'Having sinned mortally, now I know how scruples differ. I can tell the difference.' "

But there are those who are driven to sexual promiscuity, those who are driven to all sorts of excesses because they say, "I have the name, I may as well have the game. I am going to hell anyway, so I may as well enjoy myself." Many, many people feel impossibly frustrated in this fashion.

There is a woman named Kathleen Zraly, an eating-disorder specialist, who has a doctorate in psychology from Fordham University. When asked if scrupulosity still exists she says, "Yes, I think more so than any of us have an idea." She gives this as an example.

"Women continue to be socialized to be perfect, to carry the ball in all areas. Women with eating disorders display perfection that is a form of scrupulosity. They're never good enough. They're never pretty enough. Women are socialized that way, and the media reinforce this message."

This gives us one of the fundamental causes for scrupulosity. It itself is a horrifying condition, the belief that we are intrinsically no good. We may be considered the most brilliant people in the world, the most handsome people, the most beautiful people, the most talented people, but beneath the surface we feel we are no good. Therefore everything we do is evil and sinful. It does not matter how much praise we get. We are convinced that we are absolutely useless. Not only that nobody loves us, but that we are incapable of being loved for ourselves as persons. It is the thought, "If anybody knew what I am really like inside then that person would hate me, even God."

There is a description of a physician who is a practicing pediatrician who writes:

" Two major events in my life exacerbated my scrupulosity. I felt guilty on entering medical school because I had cheated on some college

exams. I'm still guilty about that although I am a good pediatrician and have a loyal patient following. ...'

"A college teacher in Scotland wrote:

" 'I have never really been able to trust in the love of God. I am afraid that God will pull the carpet out from under me. ...

" 'I grew up with a distorted conscience on sex. What if this is a sin? What if it isn't? I flitted from book to book looking for answers. I found none. ...'

"A fifty-two-year-old police captain stated: 'I worry about what is sinful. I worry about sinful thoughts, discussions, or actions in my employment as a police captain and supervisor. I worry when I go to confession whether I might have omitted something.'

"A thirty-seven-year-old female naval officer reported: 'I have recurrent thoughts which keep coming which I fear are sinful. This causes me to spend time analyzing them to decide if they're sinful, and it causes me anxiety and worry.' "

A mathematician gives his story. A director of religious education reported, "Every time I do something I suspect is wrong, even if it isn't, I feel guilty and feel I'll get zapped."

"A forty-nine-year-old nurse wrote:

" 'Today my scrupulosity...is like being alcoholic--one day at a time. Previously, I was always afraid of my doing wrong, especially in areas like possibly harming people...[so] I became paralyzed to act.'

"A forty-two-year-old diplomat stated: 'People view me as successful and a fast riser in my career. Scrupulosity has been a severe detriment to achieving a balanced life...' "

A 59-year-old woman microbiologist writes in similar fashion.

This is a real spiritual illness, truly debilitating. Above all it fills us with fear, fear of Almighty God.

What could this possibly have to do with today's extraordinary Gospel [Jn. 4:5-42] about the Samaritan woman, the woman who had been "married five times but had never really been married"? To her our Lord says, "The man you are living with now is not your husband." What would that have to do with scrupulosity?

Often those who engage in extensive sexual promiscuity do so trying to prove themselves. "I am no good but at least maybe someone will want me for this particular reason. I will give myself in this fashion."

In this Gospel, we find that this woman does things that scrupulous people do with Almighty God--she plays games with the Lord. She tries to fence with him. "You are a Jew and I am a Samaritan. How come you are even talking to me? Jews are not to talk to Samaritans." Ah, if you knew who it is who is talking to you! "Give me some water," Jesus says. She says, "You want me to use my bucket to get water? Jews are not supposed to drink water out of a bucket that belongs to a Samaritan." And so on. She was avoiding the issues, avoiding the fact that she has lived with five or six men, avoiding the fact that our Divine Lord is confronting her with the truth. But what is the truth with which he is confronting her? With his love, with his mercy, with his compassion. Initially, she thinks she is beyond that.

Then suddenly, because of our Lord's great grace and mercy, it hits her. She runs to tell all the other people, "I have found the Messiah!" Because of things that our Lord said to her, because of his word, she believed she had found the Messiah. This is of the very nature of our Divine Lord and this is what Lent is all about.

This Gospel is the perfect summary of Lent--an encounter with Christ in which ultimately we are moved toward pleading for his forgiveness because we know that he has come to suffer and to die for us and that the

God who gave his Son to be so horribly tortured and put to death for us is the same God who does not want to see us lost. Christ came to pick up the pieces of broken lives, your life and my life--not to condemn us. But he wants us to ask his forgiveness, in the confessional if this is necessary, outside the confessional if that is adequate. We are not going to ask forgiveness unless we believe we need forgiveness and unless we believe he will grant forgiveness.

This story is the great reminder that God is love, that love drives out fear. If there be any here who are afraid, whether victims of the spiritual disease of scrupulosity or not, if there are any here who are afraid, it is our Divine Lord himself who says to us as, in essence, he would say to the Samaritan woman, "Be not afraid. God is love. God drives out fear. Come to me for my mercy. Come to me to be bathed in my love."

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