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Miller, Donald Ferdinand

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by

DONALD F. MILLER, C.S. S.R.

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Don't Worry

THERE are few individuals in life who escape entirely the bugbear of worry. Some worry all the time about one thing; others worry a good share of the time about many things; almost all worry at least now and then about some things. Rather general observation of human behaviour warrants the conclusion that worrying is about as distinctive a characteristic of the human species as the more philosophically expressed attributes of rationality and risibility.

However, the human race does not seem to be satisfied to submit passively to this universal characteristic. Perhaps the most frequently given bit of advice in the world is the cryptic command, "Don't worry!" Business men tack the magic words over their desks; lawyers, doctors, social-workers, priests, inject it into the midst of more technical instructions; friends employ it as an inevitable bit of comfort for friends in distress. It would be hard to think of a more universal formula of counsel.

The only people who seem bent on promoting worry are those who have some healing commodity to sell, like gargles or facial creams or laxatives or remedies for dandruff. They insist that people worry; they create worries, on the pretext that they can destroy them with their nostrums (which they usually can't) but with the real purpose of making money off people's worries (which they usually do). Their advice is "Do worry! so that *we* won't have to worry about getting

rich"; and many are the deluded victims of their campaigns.

Whether due to lurid advertising or not, there are many worries burdening human hearts that need not be at all. Worry may be defined as a sense of protracted fear. It is that state of interior agitation, distress, anxiety, unrest, trepidation or strain that renders a person miserable and inefficient. Furthermore it means primarily those forms of fear that have no valid or sufficient cause, even though they are very real to the one they affect.

There are, of course, forms of fear that are healthy and helpful in human life. Fear provides motivation that would often otherwise be lacking. Every man should be afraid of damnation, and this fear should be a strong deterrent to sin. Every normal person should be reasonably afraid of disease, and this should keep him from exposing himself imprudently to danger of contagion. It would be both impossible and wrong to try to rid human nature of its healthy fears, because such are the immediate supports of the necessary instinct of self-preservation.

It is unhealthy fear that disturbs the peace of life, and unhealthy fear is what we mean here by worry. However, much more is needed than the command "Don't worry!" to put an end to the anguish resulting from groundless fear. Worry is a demon that can be driven out, not by the command of another, but only by self-searching and self-knowledge that will reveal the cause and suggest the suitable remedy. It is the purpose of this treatise to point out in a popular way

some of the causes of worry, to provide self-tests by which they can be recognized, and to hint at the remedies that the respective situation calls for.

I. Vanity

One of the most common causes of worry is *vanity*. Choleric and sanguinic temperaments are especially subject to it. Vanity is an inordinate love of the excellence of one's own mental, physical, social, or other qualities. Whether the excellence of the qualities about which a person is vain be imaginary or real, his inordinate love of them makes for inordinate solicitude and anxiety as to whether they are being properly shown off or properly appreciated by others. That solicitude often grows to the proportions of real worry.

A young lady who is vain about her looks will find herself worrying constantly about whether her nose is shiny; whether every wisp of hair is in the proper curl and the proper place; whether there is enough or too much rouge on her cheeks or lips; whether she is edging toward obesity, etc., etc. This kind of worry can even spoil the natural beauty with which a person is endowed; it sometimes lends a rather furtive look to the eyes, born of the constant search either for a looking-glass or an admirer; it makes for preoccupation during conversation with others, and a sort of artificial tenseness that can be recognized as a sense of fear that to relax would be to disturb in some way the ravishing effect of the beauty that is being presented. This worry leads to ex-

travagant expenditures; to harmful diets and treatments; and to agonies over a word of criticism. Often, too, it becomes as distressing to the mere onlooker as to the one afflicted.

Public speakers are subject to acute forms of the worry that springs from vanity. Either they feel that they have a reputation to uphold, or at least, some power of eloquence that should be recognized. Fear grips them lest they might not come up to their own estimate of themselves or might not make the impression on others expected of them. Worry sets in acutely from the moment they begin to prepare a discourse; it grows in intensity as the moment for appearance approaches, and often even follows the speech in a sense of failure—failure to gratify the lurking vanity. Flattery banishes the worry for a moment, but it always returns; words of criticism intensify it.

Vanity is even the cause of much of the worry that results in bashfulness and timidity in the social contacts of some people. They have an inward vision of some ideal of social decorum or honor that they want to represent; with vain eyes fixed on that, they grow afraid that they may happen to say the wrong word, or get mixed up in a sentence or make a breach of etiquette. Their hidden vanity renders them unwilling to take the chance and the result is that they stammer, blush, become reticent—in general, show themselves ill-at-ease and feel interior anguish.

Worries that are due to vanity can be diagnosed as such and prescribed for only

by persons who are willing to answer in undisguised honesty such questions as the following:

“Exactly what am I afraid of? Is it not just a loss of dignity, or of honor, or admiration, or praise?”

“Are these the things that I pretend to think worth living for and working for? Or rather do I deceive myself, making believe that I am living and working solely for the benefit and happiness of others, while all the time it is my own vanity that is being served?”

“Does not excessive worry about my appearance or my conversation or my work point to the practice of such hypocrisy in myself? And does not such worry frustrate not only my pretended purposes in life, but even the aims of vanity itself, by interfering with my real efficiency and natural abilities? What good is such worry if that be its cause and its effect?”

The remedy that such questions will suggest is a good dose of humility. Humility does not allow a person to set up fictitious goals of attention or praise to be expected; it makes a man want to know only the truth about himself or his abilities, and to be known only for what he actually is. It makes him simple, natural, unaffected, and unself-conscious; and such people are usually free from worry—at least the worry of vanity.

II. Diffidence

Closely allied to vanity as a cause of worry, because it is also connected with a wrong

attitude toward self, is *diffidence*, or an exaggerated sense of inferiority. While the vain person has an exaggerated sense of his own excellence or ability and a fear that he may not live up to it or receive recognition for it, the diffident person has an exaggerated sense of his incapacity, and the result is the fear of even ordinary tasks and responsibilities. The vain person worries lest he may not be exceptional; the diffident person worries lest he may not even be ordinary.

Modern life presents many types of worry due to diffidence. Hypochondriacs are persons who are diffident about their health, and their tribe has increased since the day the microbe was discovered, down through the years that have witnessed both scientific campaigns against real disease and advertising campaigns against imaginary disease. The hypochondriac is seldom feeling well enough to undertake his ordinary tasks, and when he does, fear of some approaching malignity holds him back. To him, coughing may mean tuberculosis; a sore throat may mean diphtheria or a similar fate; and a headache may bring a paralyzing fear of high blood pressure, which sometimes, as a matter of fact, results from such fear.

It is possible and not uncommon to over-emphasize the imaginary factor in people's physical ailments, and this often leads to downright neglect and mistreatment of those who are really ill. But the hypochondriacs remain a steadfast group; always afraid of what they might have or will have if they do not take exaggerated care of themselves.

Then there is the spiritually diffident type, marked by exaggerated discouragement over faults and sins and anxiety over temptations. "I can't" is the most frequent phrase on their lips; the past simply blots out the possibilities of the future with a terrifying dark veil; every temptation is looked on as a signal for a new defeat; every means of moral strength and courage is deemed inadequate on account of their weakness. Often this moral diffidence is accompanied (if not really caused) by false notions of good and evil that it is difficult to rectify; the whole situation becomes a problem too intricate for the sufferer to solve.

A third type of diffidence as a cause of worry is that of the man who is afraid that he will not be able to fulfill the responsibilities of his state. Fathers of families are especially subject to it. They are afraid they will not be able to hold their jobs, or afraid that they will not be able to get another job if they lose what they have; afraid that they will not be able to support their families. It must be admitted that the economic mess of the last several years has given too much solid ground to such fears. However, apart from depressions and unemployment crises, there are those who lose jobs for no other reason than their fear of losing them, which paralyzes their natural abilities; those who cannot find jobs because the inertia caused by worry is evident at a glance to a would-be employer.

Since this kind of worry springs from an exaggerated sense of weakness, the person afflicted has to concentrate on analyzing the

strength he really possesses, and for what he lacks in that to trust in the providence of God. A good starting point is the method of St. Augustine crystallized in the axiom: "Others could do it, why cannot I?" The diffident person must take heart from the accomplishments of others less favored than himself. The hypochondriac will find that men and women have at times thrown off disease by forgetting about it; they have accomplished marvels in the face of disease, and when hampered by the presence of some real disease, have diverted their energies towards things they could do that make their names live in honor forever. The morally diffident person will take courage from the spiritual accomplishments of men like Augustine himself, and others who had a far worse background than their own against which to set a morally good and even holy life; the physically or socially diffident person will find, if he looks around him, that far less happily endowed individuals than himself have not only fulfilled essential responsibilities, but have risen to some degree of success.

But while such persons are learning confidence in themselves, they must also be developing their confidence in God. It is He who gives a man his responsibilities in life, and He has never failed to give an individual the health, strength and courage he needed for what was expected of him. The most diffident person in the world can be inspired by meditation on that simple truth.

III. Secret Concupiscence

A third fruitful cause of worry is one not often mentioned but very common; it is secret and unfulfilled desire or concupiscence. Often people who wear furrowed brows and anxious expressions are the victims of the most selfish and unhealthy fear of all: the fear that they have missed or are missing some of the sweets of life. And not infrequently it is forbidden sweets that they are afraid of missing.

Many a married man leads an agitated existence simply because he is inwardly rebelling against what he thinks is the monotony of his home life and secretly dreaming about rare and exotic forms of pleasure and excitement which he has not opportunity to enjoy. Sometimes such a man, displaying all the signs of protracted worry, gets sympathy that he does not deserve. "Poor man," his neighbors say, "he is not well, or his business is in bad shape, etc." This is one instance where gossip is kinder than the reality; because what is really worrying the heart of the man is that he cannot do everything he likes and enjoy everything he desires.

Many a so-called neurotic woman is made such over the non-fulfillment of impossible desires. The motion pictures with their luxurious settings, the cheap "love and passion" magazines, the torid romantic novels, the newspaper play-up of gay divorcees, the columnists, glorifying of night-clubs and night-life have created and fostered innumerable desires that haunt sensual men and weak-souled women. Because they can-

not live in anything like the pace of their unmortified dreams, life has for them but one long worry over what they are missing.

Self-diagnosis in this species of worry is extremely difficult. The worries spring from an entirely false view of life and a radically distorted idea of what brings true peace and joy. What makes the state still more difficult to prescribe for is the nebulous character of the desires that are racking the soul. The victim often does not know exactly what he wants; he knows he wants something other than life is giving him, but the pointer of desire swings so rapidly from one thing to another that he never has time to recognize by what he is being misled.

Despite the difficulty, the sufferer from frustrated concupiscence has to force from himself honest answers to some of the following questions:

“Just what do I desire that I haven’t got? Forbidden experiences? Sinful pleasures? Freedom from all restraint? Relief from all responsibility? What noble desires for a creature born with a mind and a free will and an everlasting destiny! What degrading cowardice to let such desires destroy my usefulness in life!”

“And if I were granted my fill of all these things would I have what I wanted? Did anybody ever find happiness in such things? Are not the soundest values in life to be found in one’s work, one’s friends, one’s means of *innocent* joy, one’s honor, even one’s suffering for the happiness of others? Is it not because I realize this in some vague way that I do not plunge into

the sort of pleasure-seeking that I desire? Then why do I torture myself and others by this secret yearning for what I have not and never shall have?"

Such forthright self-questioning will lead to what the worried sensualist needs most of all — a healthy mortification of his appetites and desires and his thoughts and dreams, and unyielding remembrance that a sense of duty and responsibility earnestly applied brings the only real rewards a man can know in this life or hereafter.

IV. Intolerance

The above forms of worry are all based on wrong attitudes towards self. There are many more worries that spring from a wrong attitude toward others. First among these is the attitude of intolerance.

By intolerance, as a cause of worry, we mean that attitude of mind that makes some people fuss and fume and agitate themselves over the mistakes, imprudences, sins and faults of others, sometimes even when these have no direct bearing on their own lives. Three marks denote them clearly: 1) They "cannot understand" other people's mistakes — thus showing that they have little or no knowledge of human nature; 2) They cannot conceive that they themselves might be mistaken in condemning the conduct of others; 3) They cannot bear with equanimity the sight of mistakes; there arises in them a sense of personal affront or sheer indignity offered to themselves. The agitation of such persons in a world like ours seldom subsides.

This worry displays itself in many differ-

ent spheres — some of them trivial and others important. Almost everyone has met the “intolerant automobile driver.” He has an uncanny ability for noticing other people’s driving mistakes — some of them invisible to the normal eye. A flagrant breaking of some traffic rule throws him into a spasm; it evokes profanity; it calls for a tirade against all automobile drivers (except himself), it rankles in his memory and has to be told often with exaggerations. The more normal person is not unmindful of the dangers of the road, nor naïvely trustful of all drivers; when an accident or a near accident is caused by another’s folly, he may become wrathful or excited; but beyond that he does not worry. The intolerant driver worries about everything he sees on the road, whether it affects him or not.

In more important affairs, intolerant worriers are not less excitable. Their minds and conversations are filled with indignation, for example, over the crooked deals of politicians, some fancied, some real; or over the ignorance and ineptitude of educators; or over the human mistakes made by priests and spiritual leaders; or over the lack of common sense shown by the citizenry as a whole. They are the prophets of doom. The sad thing is that life knows so little serenity for them; it is one long worry — over others.

This source of worry has dire consequences when one who is afflicted by it gets into a position of responsibility with or over others. It makes him suspicious, overbearing, unforgiving, bitterly critical of everything that is done by those subject to him. These

qualities turn others against him — and because he has so exalted a sense of his own righteousness, this reaction embitters him the more. So there follows a pyramiding of worry upon worry, until his whole life is soured, and there is no one left to bring any comfort or solace to his heart.

Even an amateur psychologist can diagnose this condition of human nature as due to a very destructive form of pride. The intolerant person has a superior confidence in his own judgment, often based on the natural endowment of a sound sense of right and wrong. Gradually he has grown unconscious that he could be wrong — or at least convinced that whatever mistakes he makes are trivial in comparison with the gigantic mistakes of others. Since he knows what is right and good for human beings, he is convinced that others ought to know this also, and therefore when they make mistakes it is sheer contrariness and malice. Interiorly he writhes; exteriorly he fumes and condemns.

To overcome his worry, the intolerant person has a difficult task. He needs two things badly; humility and charity. Humility must teach him that, even when he is most convinced that he is right and others are wrong, the reverse might be true; and that even when he is right and others wrong, that does not constitute him a judge of his fellow man. Charity must teach him to realize how many circumstances enter into the actions of others: how poorly they may be instructed; how neglected their training, how much less endowed than he with mental qualities; how possibly guiltless in the sight

of God for what to him seems certain sin. Above all, charity must teach him to forgive others their certain faults — and to turn his powerful energies toward the exercise of those deeds of mercy that will help others avoid the mistakes that it is so easy for him to avoid. All this will be contrary to his temperament; but it is absolutely necessary for his peace.

V. Over-Anxious Love

A second form of undue worry that springs from social relationships may be called "over-anxious love." It is the characteristic worry of mothers with regard to their children; of young lovers and husbands and wives; of those who have the responsibility for others in almost any field.

There is a degree of anxiety that is the inseparable accompaniment of true love, and that is not what we mean here. It belongs to the very nature of love to wish well for the one beloved, to desire sincerely and wholeheartedly that person's happiness and security. This positive well wishing cannot be separated from its counterpart, viz., a lingering anxiety lest any harm should befall the loved one. Normally, the latter sentiment should express itself by eagerness to do anything within reason to prevent harm or misfortune; a sincere concern when some actual danger is imminent, and the constant employment of sound means like prayer and intelligent advice in behalf of the loved one's security.

In too many human beings concern over loved ones does not confine itself to these

reasonable expressions, but becomes a cause of acute and unnecessary worry. The mother who will not permit herself a moment of rest so long as a son or daughter is absent from her side; who conjures up visions of almost impossible misfortunes happening to them; who goes to extraordinary and unnecessary lengths to ensure their safety — is afflicted with the worry of over-anxious love. The young lover who becomes incapacitated for work and the ordinary duties of life by the groundless fear of some danger to his sweetheart is another victim. And the disease sometimes afflicts those who in a professional capacity have a measure of responsibility and care over others, like teachers, matrons, even doctors and priests. Strangely enough, this form of worry seldom afflicts those who should worry because of neglect of duty; it presses down on those who do all in their power for those whom they love or are caring for; it makes them worry over the fact that they did not do what they could not do.

This source of worry is not only a source of acute discomfort, but it leads to graver practical effects. Three particularly evil ones may be mentioned: 1) because persons who worry thus excessively without reason are ill-prepared for the real tribulations of life, they are in danger of hysterics and other forms of nervous breakdown when catastrophes do occur as permitted by the Providence of God. 2) Their excessive worry leads to downright interference with the lives of others, as when mothers interfere with their sons' and daughters' vocations, whether to

the religious or to the married state. 3) This worry is directly responsible for the "spoiling" of many a child—who never learns to take care of himself because a doting parent never permitted him to carry a single responsibility alone.

Perhaps few worries are less frequently or adequately analyzed by those suffering from them than that of over-anxious love. If it were analyzed more often, it would not be so common. It is due, first of all, to *pride*, which makes the sufferer believe that he is absolutely and at all times and in all places necessary for the safety of the one in question; that if only he can regulate and supervise every single moment of the loved one's time, there will never be any danger. Combined with that pride is a disguised selfishness, which, under the cloak of pure concern for another, is really concerned about self and the happiness which is dependent on the loved one's safety. It is this selfish element in over-anxious love that leads to the grave evils of interference with and misdirecting the lives of others.

What is to be done? How can one afflicted with the habit of worrying unreasonably about the safety or happiness of others develop a more reasonable attitude? Only by applying the proper remedies to the causes that underlie it. Such a one, instead of believing he or she alone is capable of properly protecting the loved one, present or absent, must learn to believe in the ability of that loved one to take care of himself for all ordinary circumstances, and in the Providence of God to exercise its loving care in

all circumstances for which neither lover or loved one are prepared. This last is extremely important, because almost the essence of over-anxious love is to mistrust the Providence of God. Supplying this defect will fortify the soul against hours of futile worry, and against anything like hysterics when God does permit something untoward to happen. The word "adieu," which may be translated "I leave you in the hands of God," represents the tranquil attitude one should seek in parting for a short or a long time from one greatly loved.

If there is selfishness in excessive worry over others, i.e., the fear of losing the happiness that their presence brings, that should be tempered by meditation on the truth that God is the first owner of every human being, that He gives each one tasks to be fulfilled that no human love should dare to interfere with. If He gives evident signs of a particular vocation to a youth, and a mother or father unreasonably interposes, the latter will usually find that they have not only disrupted God's plans, but have sacrificed the real happiness of their children for their own. And that is selfishness that has far-reaching effects; not the least of which will be mounting worry in later years.

VI. Jealousy

A third cause of worry due to a wrong attitude towards others is jealousy. None takes a more terrific toll of its victims; none leads to greater upset and catastrophe in human lives.

Jealousy is a vice through which a man permits himself to suffer unrest, agitation, anguish over the good fortune of others because he sees in that some loss to himself. There may be a foundation for jealousy in the sense that another's good fortune is depriving a man of some good, although that does not constitute an apology or excuse for it. And jealousy may be without foundation, or fostered on purely imaginary grounds. Jealousy on imaginary grounds usually mingles its fatal power with that which has begun with some slight but real wrong. How far jealousy even on imaginary grounds can carry a man from normalcy has been supremely depicted in Shakespeare's tragedy of Othello, the Moor.

Jealousy can cause worry and agitation in trivial matters as well as important. Anyone who has anything to do with organizations of individuals has almost surely had experience of petty jealousies among the members. One who thought himself or herself cut out for certain work is passed over for another; acute suffering sets in; gives rise to whispering campaigns and schemes; causes disruptions and disunion; and makes not only the sufferer, but all concerned miserable. One is selected or appointed to office over another who thought to have a prior right; jealousy rages in the latter's breast, inspires obstructionist policies, sometimes succeeds in nullifying the efforts of all concerned towards achieving some purpose. Now and then we read in the newspapers how jealousy among the members of a baseball or football team makes what should be a championship team

give but a mediocre account of itself. Wherever human beings are united, one or several afflicted with the worry of jealousy is likely to be found.

In the more important spheres, the worry of jealousy is proportionately destructive. A jealous husband, i.e., one who misinterprets every kindness or conventional attention shown to his wife as an infringement of his rights, can torture himself into insanity and his wife into almost any kind of crime; jealousy among statesmen leads to the vilest forms of venality and corruption. We are dealing with the subject here only as a cause of worry, but its effects are the most powerful indication of how it torments a soul.

To analyze jealousy is not difficult — except for the one who has let it take possession of his soul. Such a one should know that if not checked, it can lead to a real mania — a mental and moral breakdown. Its incipient causes are to be found in an exaggerated sense of one's personal rights over others. The disappointed office-seeker in an organization believes that his self-styled superior capacities give him absolute rights over others; whereas, as a matter of fact, he may not be superior, and if he is, his capacities may not be of the right kind for leadership. The jealous husband thinks that he has acquired rights over his wife not only in those things that pertain to matrimony, but over her thoughts, emotions, wishes, friends — everything that pertains to her. With this exaggerated sense of his rights, the jealous person interprets the most innocent actions

of others as aimed at depriving him of his just dues; the result is anguish.

The treatment of this exaggerated sense of right and too ready sense of injury must be stern and uncompromising. Like the treatment of almost every cause of worry, it begins with the practice of humility, progresses with the attainment of greater humility, destroys the last traces of jealousy when perfect humility has been attained. The humility that renders jealousy null teaches a man to remember, not only his rights, but the salutary truth that if others knew all his secret faults and shortcomings, they would have a right to treat him far more shabbily than they do. It makes him realize that the least attention from others is more than his due: that even that is dependent on his not looking for more; that the only kind of love and honor from others that can bring peace and joy, is the kind that is earned by true charity and humble service. Above all, the jealous man must crush out of his mind the thought of fancied slights and merely apparent injuries. Let him do that by wishing that he could suffer some real injury at the hands of others, which would atone for his real but secret faults, and urge him on to greater nobility of soul.

VII. Scrupulosity

By far the most virulent unnecessary form of worry that can attack a human being is that which involves his relationship to God and takes on some form of scrupulosity. Because the relationship involved here is so much more important than anything else in

human life, the disturbances that may affect it can and often do become utterly paralyzing.

Scrupulosity is the generic name given to the cause of excessive worry to be found in fear concerning one's relationship to God. It is a condition in which the conscience is unreasonably inclined to judge that actions are sinful or have been sinful when in reality they are not so at all; or to judge that actions are gravely offensive to God when the offense, if any, is of minor degree. The scrupulous person, therefore, sees himself as a confirmed enemy of God, in danger constantly of being condemned to hell; and the result is not mere anxiety, but anguish of soul.

To analyze the state more clearly, it will be helpful to describe the conscience and the different states in which it may be found. In itself, conscience is a practical judgment of the reason showing a person what is morally good or morally evil in the actual circumstances of life. It is not merely a theoretical judgment of what should be done under certain circumstances; it is the judgment that dictates to a person when the circumstances are actually at hand and an action is about to be performed. Thus it is conscience that tells a Catholic when he wakes up on a Sunday morning: you must go to Mass. It is conscience that whispers to a person when he opens a book and finds it to be obscene: you must put it aside. It is conscience that cries out when a man is aroused to violent anger: thou shalt not kill. Hence it is always the judgment that im-

mediately precedes action or omission of action. If the action is according to the conscience or the judgment about what is morally good, it is a good action; if an action is deliberately placed immediately after the conscience has shown it to be a bad action, then of course it is bad.

Everybody is bound to obey his conscience, but that does not mean that the conscience never makes a mistake. He who follows his conscience always, never commits a sin, but he may be doing something that objectively is wrong. For this reason we talk about different kinds of consciences: a true conscience, an erroneous conscience, a perplexed conscience. A *true* conscience is a correct decision about what is right or wrong in a given set of circumstances. For example, the conscience is correct or true when it tells a person he will do wrong if he does bodily harm to his neighbor in a fit of anger; when it announces that to give in to a present temptation to impurity would be to commit a sin, etc. An *erroneous* conscience is one that decides a present issue incorrectly; e.g., if my conscience were to tell me that I am bound, on a certain Sunday morning, to get up from bed while I am seriously ill, and go to Mass, it would be erroneous; if my conscience, due to faulty education, tells me it is wrong to play cards on Sunday, it is an erroneous conscience; I am bound to obey my conscience, even though it may be erroneous, but I am also bound to use the kind of diligence I use in all serious affairs of life to inform myself and make it easy

for my conscience to make correct and true decisions.

A *perplexed* conscience is one which decides that two actions, one of which must be performed, are both sinful, so that sin seems unavoidable. For example, if I am taking care of a sick person on Sunday morning, and my conscience tells me that to leave the person alone would be a sin, and not to leave the person to go to Mass would be a sin, I have a perplexed conscience. In this state, I should remove my perplexity either by consulting another before acting; or, if that be impossible, I should judge which is the lesser of the two evils and choose that; or, if that too be impossible, I should know that I can choose either action without sin, because freedom of choice must be present before there can be sin, and in this instance, there is no freedom: one of the two actions must be performed.

A scrupulous conscience may be described by comparison with the foregoing definitions. It is an *erroneous* conscience in the sense that it decides that certain actions are sinful that are not sinful at all. It is a perplexed conscience in the sense that it sees sin in so many actions and omissions that it places the soul in a continuous dilemma, but without giving it any principles for escaping the dilemma. It is the opposite of a *lax erroneous* conscience, which decides that there is no sin in actions that really are sinful and which results in the absence of worry where there should be worry. It is not to be confused with a *tender* conscience, which may be defined as one that is quickly aware

of the danger of even light (but real) sins and fears them intensely. A scrupulous person therefore is one who without sufficient reasons decides that actions are evil — and is therefore in a constant state of unwarranted fear of sin.

There are different types of scrupulous persons. Some are fearful mainly about sins of the past; they are afraid that sins they actually committed have not been confessed, or not confessed properly, or not confessed with sorrow; or they are afraid that they have committed sins they did not know about or have forgotten; or that motives made certain indifferent actions sinful. Such persons have a constant desire to confess the past over and over again; to tell their sins in new and different ways; to live over the past in imagination and so try to recapture the exact thoughts, motives, feelings, etc., that accompanied the real or imaginary sins.

Other scrupulous persons are fearful about the present. Usually it is one particular kind of sin of which they are unduly afraid. Some are afraid of sins of unkindness and hatred; every glancing unkind or suspicious thought is interpreted as a sin; every mention of another's name seems to them to be in some way calumnious or sinful; every action they are about to perform is poised in mid-air while they torture themselves with thoughts of whether it will be hurtful to someone else. Or they may be fearful of the sin of impurity. On the streets, at home, at work, while reading or studying or recreating themselves, they are in constant terror that things seen or thought of momentarily might be sins. Such

persons too can never feel content that they have narrated the full story of their sins to a confessor; circumstances, motives, conditions must all be gone into at great length and even then doubts and worries remain.

The one thing that all scrupulous persons have in common is an *unreasonable* fear of sin, and an inability to judge correctly and reasonably about sin. Therefore scrupulosity is in reality an abnormal state, just as any state in which the reason is interfered with is abnormal. The extent of the abnormality may be very limited; on all other subjects except sin, such persons may be able to think logically and correctly and clearly; they may even be able to direct others correctly in matters pertaining to sin; only in regard to their own sins, real or possible or imaginary, they are in constant perplexity and fear.

The causes of this state of mind are various. Sometimes scrupulosity is the result of a melancholic temperament that has not been checked in its tendencies toward excessive self-examination and morbid analysis of its faults and weaknesses. Sometimes it arises from ignorance accompanied by obstinacy; sometimes from one-sided education and instruction, in which too much emphasis has been placed on the terrifying elements in religion; sometimes scrupulosity is a temptation of the devil or a trial permitted by God as a means of developing the virtues of patience and humility and obedience. Some saints tell us that every soul that seeks perfection will be permitted the trial of scrupulosity at some time

or another, as an effective means of purification.

Whatever the cause of scrupulosity, it is well to keep clearly in mind that it essentially consists in an unreasonable attitude towards sin. This means that the *conscience*, which ordinarily judges reasonably about the goodness or badness of actions to be performed, is "thrown out of gear" — detached from the sane reasoning processes that should govern it always. It would require many pages to describe the agonizing results of this condition.

For the cure of scruples, two things are absolutely necessary. The first is to recognize the presence of scrupulosity; the second is to submit unreservedly to the guidance and authority of someone else.

I. It is not easy for a scrupulous person to recognize his own scrupulosity. As a matter of fact, the diseased conscience will try to delude him into thinking that an admission of scrupulosity would itself be a sin, or would be a deliberate seeking of an excuse for sin. For this reason, we place certain questions here that will enable a person to decide whether he is scrupulous or not. If a good number of these questions must be answered in the affirmative, then there is no doubt that the trial of scrupulosity has been permitted by God.

1. Do you find yourself worrying almost constantly about the danger of committing a certain sin, and trying to take minute and exhaustive measures against it? For example, do you find yourself shutting your eyes tightly, almost painfully, to ward off distractions

at prayer? Do you shake your head or distort your features to drive away evil thoughts? Do you avoid people just because you are afraid you might have to hear an unkind remark in their company?

2. Do you worry a great deal about past encounters with temptation?

3. Do you repeat good actions because you are afraid they were not good enough the first time, e.g., do you repeat prayers over and over because of distractions that seemed to spoil them?

4. Do you find it difficult to distinguish between venial and mortal sins? Do you think some of your venial sins must have been mortal because you committed them so deliberately and consciously?

5. Do you find yourself doubting the decision of a confessor about some question you asked or some doubtful sin you confessed — wanting to ask others about the same thing?

6. Do you fear, after a sincere confession, that you did not explain your sin clearly enough?

7. Do you feel that possibly the confessor did not understand what you were trying to tell him?

8. Do you find that there is little peace in your soul after confession, even though you confessed to the best of your ability?

9. Do you experience temptations to despair — and convictions that you are the most abandoned sinner in the world?

10. Do you experience a constant desire to make another general confession, more

complete than any previous one you ever made?

If several of these questions must in all honesty be affirmatively answered, then you know that you are scrupulous, and knowing that, you have the first requirement for a cure.

II. Once the state of scrupulosity is recognized, the second step towards a cure must be taken — that of blind, unreserved obedience to a director. Scruples are unreasonable fears of sin; therefore the one afflicted with them must not trust to his own reason to overcome the fears. So long as one's conscience is working reasonably, one is bound to obey it, though it be erroneous at times; but when one's conscience is working unreasonably, then the reason and authority of another must be accepted as a guide. That is why the scrupulous person must give up trying to reason things out for himself, and do what he is told.

He will find, however, that this is a difficult thing to do. Strangely enough, the greatest impediment to the cure of scruples is the obstinacy of the sufferer. That obstinacy springs fundamentally from pride, which very naturally asserts itself in an effort to prevent the admission that the reason is not functioning correctly in this matter of sin. No one likes to admit that he is acting or thinking unreasonably, even to escape intense suffering; that is why there is such a conflict in the soul of the scrupulous person: on the one hand, he may admit that there is something wrong, that he is not acting like other people, that God never intended

that souls should be so tortured; and on the other he does not like to give up the independence of his reason — consciously or unconsciously he clings to the thought that he himself may be able to solve all his difficulties. This pride must be overcome before obedience and submission are possible and before there will be a cure.

Even after the scrupulous person has humbled himself and decided to submit blindly to the guidance of a director or confessor, he will have difficulties — and for these difficulties must be prepared by learning by heart certain principles. The chief ones are these two:

I. *There will never be sin in any action that is performed or in any omission that is commanded by the confessor, even though the latter were to make a mistake in commanding or forbidding certain things.* This means, for example, if the confessor commands the scrupulous person never again to mention a certain sin in confession, he is to be obeyed, no matter how many reasons appear for disobeying. It means that if the confessor commands him to receive Holy Communion despite any thoughts or temptations that arise, he is to be obeyed. It means that if the confessor commands him to do certain things that seem to him to be occasions of sin — he is to obey, remembering that it cannot possibly be a sin if it has been commanded.

II. *The only subject on which the scrupulous person should examine himself carefully is that of disobedience to the confessor.* That sin is to be the first matter he thinks

of when preparing for confession; the first sin he tells to the priest; the one sin for which he should be most sorry and about which he should make a new and more determined resolve.

Apart from confession itself and the obedience it involves, the scrupulous person should use other means of escaping from his interior worry. Some form of work that will occupy the faculties of body and mind—some form of recreation that will bring forgetfulness of other things and fatigue—some hobby that will absorb the attention of the mind—these things are great helps in the restoration of balance to the scrupulous soul.

Although scrupulosity is the cause of a violent form of worry and the cause of worse abnormalities, the one who finds himself thus afflicted should not let discouragement possess him. Innumerable persons have at some time or other in life been scrupulous and have completely recovered; others who are scrupulous now, can be cured completely if they use the means available. Two words represent the whole process of cure—or put meaning into the advice: Don't worry. They are: Recognize, and Obey. Recognize your condition as temporarily off balance on the subject of sin—then obey the director you have chosen. It may take time, but in time the cure will be effected.

