

From Scruples to Consolation to Consoler

by Richard Zenith

I spent long hours reciting my prayers before the holy statues in front of the altar, mixing in what Latin phrases I had learned. *Angus Dei, qui tolis peccata mundi, miserere nobis.* I would kneel on the bare floor, thinking that such ascetic practices would purify my devotion to God. I would even recite my beads, though discreetly, for the rosary seemed more a pastime of old widows. During those hours which I passed in that somber church, I felt a pounding in my heart. It was a combination of pious fear and child-like love, I felt a warm touch that comforted me in my childhood anxieties I do not know if that feeling was the touch of God, or if it was merely a psychological effect of all the holy things which fill Roman Catholic church. But whatever doubts I have about the origin of that warm feeling. I know that the feeling itself was very real to me. I lived for that feeling.

Only vague impressions and isolated incidents of my childhood have survived. When I reflect on my Catholic upbringing, two words bring themselves to mind: "scruples" and "consolation." "Scruples" referred to the doubts and misgivings I had about myself and about my faith. When I was feeling guilty and repentant over a certain sin, when I did not feel that I was making progress in my devotions, when I felt insufficiently humble during these times I would say, "I am experiencing scruples." "Consolation" referred to the good feelings I would derive from my devotions. I would often receive consolation after Holy Communion, after Confession, or during those long hours of reciting prayers on my knees before the crucifix or the icons.

At ten years of age life was already a serious business for me. It consisted of a continual struggle between scruples and consolation. The Catholic catechism of the fifties took account of every act of bad behavior. We were given lists with examples of "mortal" sins and "venial" sins. We were taught that unless a sin had been forgiven by a priest, we would have to suffer for it in the hereafter. If, when we died, our souls were stained with unconfessed mortal sins, then we would go to hell. If we had unconfessed venial sins, we would have to serve time in purgatory. I remember praying that God would let me die as I was walking out of a confessional box — with no unconfessed sins! As a child I could never escape the fear of death. These were my scruples.

On the other hand, I experienced great consolation in the Church. My young heart was easily stirred by all the holy objects: holy cards, statues, amulets, holy water, the Eucharist, the missals, the rosary. These instilled in me a sense of purpose in my life. Serving God gave me tremendous satisfaction. This was my consolation.

I tried to increase my consolation and decrease my scruples. but I never made much progress. My scruples always hung over me, whereas my consolation would leave me as soon as I left the church building. I began to question the intricate system of sins which was detailed in the catechism. Frustrated and weighed down by scruples, I finally gave up my faith in the Church and in God. Looking back, I do not regret those years. They were part of God's process in me, and those years linger with me still.

At age fifteen I met Jesus Christ and knew Him in a way that I had not known Him as a child. Christ's presence in my life became tremendously real, and this new faith in Him was more solid than my childhood faith in the Church and the catechism. Still, there were certain parallels between the two faiths. I no longer feared death, because I knew that my sins were already forgiven by Christ, but the problem of scruples reemerged in full force. I found myself continually questioning my faithfulness to God. I doubted the sincerity of my good deeds, and

I constantly rated my performance and found it lacking. I was not praying enough, or I was not sharing the gospel adequately. I did not apply myself as diligently to the Scriptures as I was able, or I simply did not devote enough of my energy to “spiritual” matters. My first years as a believer were happy years, yet I remember with clarity these self-doubts — these scruples — that oppressed me.

The battles of scruples brought me to a point of despair. In that despair of utter solitude, after I had given up the battle as lost, God spoke to me, saying, “All battles are won in Me. Come to Me and I will give you rest. For My yoke is easy, and my burden is light.” I did rest in Him, and I learned that I could rest in Him because He was resting in me. The 139th Psalm best captures the spirit of that period in my life.

*Where can I go from Thy Spirit?
Or where can I flee from Thy presence?
If I ascend to heaven, Thou art there;
If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, Thou are there.
If I take the wings of the dawn,
If I dwell in the remotest part of the sea,
Even there Thy hand will lead me,
And Thy right hand will lay hold of me,
If I say, “Surely the darkness will overwhelm me,
And the light around me will be night.”
Even the darkness is not dark to Thee,
And the night is as bright as the day.
Darkness and light are alike to Thee. — Psalm 139:7-12*

I basked in the love of God, ever being aware of His intimate presence within me. My life was devoted to thanking and praising our Lord without ceasing. Even in my dreams I would worship Him. Sometimes I found it difficult to concentrate on my work at hand, because I was so filled with the sense of His presence. Scruples were no longer a problem; now I was experiencing consolation.

Resting in the Lord was a wonderful place to be, and I was convinced that I would stay there all my life. What I did not consider is the possibility that Christ might not stay. After having such a strong sense of His presence, I suddenly found myself without Him. I would pray and meditate and read the Scriptures, but my awareness of God’s presence diminished until I felt that He had left me altogether. Oh I still knew that Christ was joined to my spirit as one, but my knowledge rested solely on blind faith. I could not feel Him, see Him, or hear Him, I could not sense Him so as to worship and love Him.

In desperation I finally shook my fist at God, saying, “How can life be worth living, if I cannot live it with You? Why do You keep Yourself so far from me? You know that I love You, yet You hide Yourself. What is it, Lord? What do you want from me?”

He answered me then. He said, “*All these years I have made you very aware of My love for you. I have been a Rock on which you have stood firmly. Freely you have received, now freely give. As I have loved you, so you shall love others. You shall be a rock to those around you. Go, you be Christ to the world.*”

In a very real sense Christ left me. And He has never returned. God pushed me out of “resting in the Lord” into resting as the Lord.” Rather than receive consolation, I was to give it out.

Having left behind scruples, and no longer having the consolation of wonderful feelings from my friendship with Christ, I was left with a new purpose: to console.

I have occasionally missed the times of consolation, but there is no turning back in this life. Since I know myself as a form of Christ, I no longer feel Him as a separate Person. I am aware of the transcendent God who is wholly beyond my human understanding, but my vision is no longer centered on the outer God. Instead I focus my attention on the inner Christ, who is the real me. My friendship with Christ, wherein He was always *with* me and consoling me, has given way to the realization of myself as a form of Christ, wherein I must be a friend to others.

After depending on the Lord to work through me for so many years, I suddenly found Him very quiet, saying only. *"Do what you want to do. You are a creator."* I saw myself saddled with tremendous responsibility, and I felt as though I was returning to my childhood faith in which God's work depended on me. But now there was a great difference. Now I had the endless resources of Jesus Christ from which to proceed. I knew that it is not I, but Christ in me. But yet it is me. Now I am the decision-maker, knowing that my will is His will. To say "I believe in God" also means "I believe in myself." No longer can I go whining to God; He does not hear me. He only says, *"If you seek comfort, then look into yourself, for you are a comforter now."*

A consoler is a leaning post for others. He listens, he empathizes, he meets physical needs, he gives counsel, he believes in others, he loves. A consoler has faith and builds confidence in those who have no self-confidence. Through the love of a consoler, the consoled one is able to finally love himself. By placing confidence in an insecure person, that person gains confidence. A consoler must be a changeless, visible Christ to those who still need the outer support of signs and miracles. In other words, the consoler no longer experiences miracles, rather, he himself is in some sense a miracle to others. Through death in himself he brings life to the world.

The consoler peels off the layers of guilt and shame with which others have clothed themselves. He shows others that they are valuable, wonderful people, precious in the sight of God. He gives people hope and makes them feel good about living. Yet the consoler himself dies a daily death. He bears upon himself the burdens of others, trading his compassion for their griefs. The consoler is responsible for those who depend on him, and he constantly drains himself for their sakes. Hence the consoler often feels empty, yet somehow he creates life for others out of that emptiness. Even when he feels physically, emotionally, or spiritually sick, the consoler will continue to give out joy to those who lean on him.

The consoler walks a lonely road. There are many who love and respect him, but when those who receive his consolation are ready to stand on their own, they often take their leave without so much as a "thank you." Some who receive his consolation cannot really return love, because they are not yet able to love themselves. He who consoles bears the sorrows of others, yet there are few people with whom he can share his own sorrows and frustrations. Added to all this is God's seeming abandonment. The consoler finds himself all alone. Mysteriously, it is that aloneness which continuously impels him to reach out of himself to people in need.

Other people are the joy and glory of the consoler. He does not care about recognition, and he is not preoccupied with his own image as a "good Christian." His life is for others, and that is all there is to say.

Reader, if what you have read makes no sense to you, put this piece of writing aside. Perhaps at another time in your life it will have some significance. Or perhaps the concept of “consoler” as I have described it will never be meaningful to you. That is fine and good. I have not written this article to sway opinions. Neither do I wish to imply that God is leading us all to be consolers by way of my description.

What I have recorded is God’s own dealing with me, from scruples to consolation to consoler. I have written for those who have had similar experiences — for those who have experienced this aloneness, this feeling that God has in some sense left them. To these people I say, “Do not despair. Do not think that you are regressing. On the contrary, God is pushing you into yet another dimension. Your loss of His consolation is being replaced by a far greater calling: the role of consoler.” Can we accept this joyful but arduous calling? Our whole lives have been leading to it. How can we reject it?