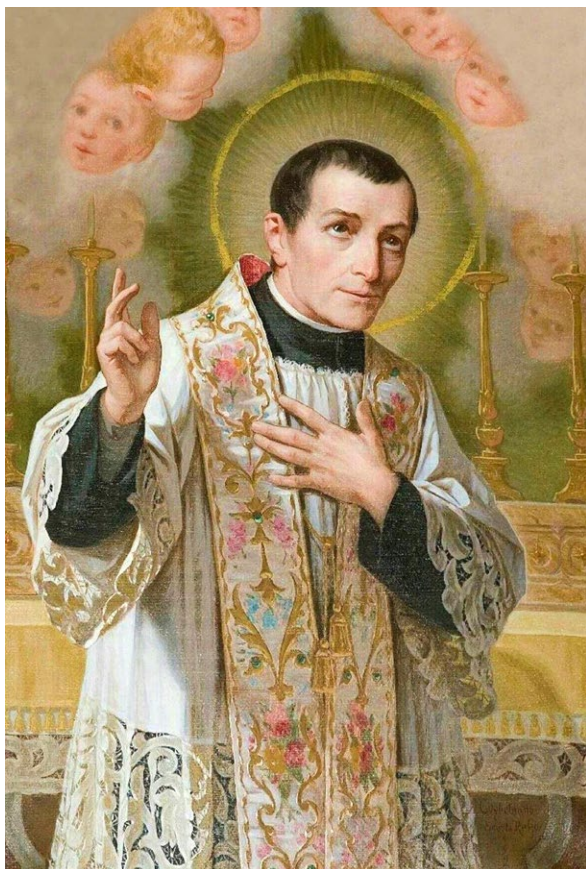




★ SALESIAN SPIRIT – ST. CAFASSO'S CONFERENCES

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ON HAVING A DELICATE CONSCIENCE

Part 1

In addition to withdrawing and praying, the priest should have a clean, pure, delicate conscience. (1) What does delicacy or purity of conscience mean? (2) What is its need and importance for the priest? (3) What are the means of obtaining and persevering in purity of conscience?

WHAT IS DELICATE CONSCIENCE?

Some think that a delicate conscience is equivalent to a scrupulous or fearful conscience, which sees evil where there is no evil! But there is actually a great difference between day and night! An example. You invite a priest for entertainment. The one who has a delicate conscience refuses and withdraws. The one with a scrupulous conscience immediately shouts and is disturbed from the beginning and will talk about it to others.

The scrupulous makes a mistake in 'what is good' and 'what is moral evil'. For non-existent reasons, evil is seen where there is no evil. The effect or the consequence of that judgement is his hatred or aversion to the evil (which is part of a good/right/delicate conscience). The 'delicate-conscience priest' abhors and hates all that is in some way sin, and he avoids it. It means:

- To be attentive and not to commit a sin.
- Be attentive and do not expose oneself to sin's origin/cause/disposition.
- And when he realizes that he has fallen into sin, he immediately gets forgiven instead of carrying it himself.

The 'delicate-conscience priest' can be compared to one who is delicate in the cleanliness of his clothes: (1) He avoids all stains; (2) avoids all exposure to some possibility of stain; and (3) despite being careful when he receives a stain, the first thing he does is to remove the stain (and if one is not careful in any of these, he will be called a careless person).

Now let us apply it to the priest literally:

I am not talking about a priest who habitually lives in mortal sin or falls easily and often into mortal

sin. Such a one is far from having a delicate conscience. We have to say that he has lost his conscience. (1) I am talking about a priest who is not living in mortal sin but who does not care to avoid it but instead says, "After all, this is just venial, just a curiosity, a small lie, ... and what great evil can there be in these?" and does not examine whether it is only venial or touches on mortal sin! (2) I speak of one who realizes that he has fallen (even many times) and fears that it could be a mortal sin but does not believe it and goes on like that for many days and weeks without taking steps to purify his conscience. (3) I speak of the priest who had been advised to be careful in something which might lead him to grave danger (such as the way of speaking, frequenting certain people, lack of modesty, lack of reserve) but who breaks those fears, baptizes these fears as depression and continues to do them!

These do not come into the category of delicate conscience or lovers of purity. What to say of a priest who does not have the delicacy of conscience? It is a disgrace for a priest, dangerous to oneself and scandalous to others.

Observe how delicacy (refinement) is esteemed even in ordinary things. Everyone at least tries to be delicate in his profession (artist, businessman, lawyer, etc.), and if not, people tell them bluntly that they are not delicate / not good! This is the quality on which credibility and reputation are based (he is a delicate/good/refined person – so he will not cheat anyone, nor will he rob anyone, etc.). If the world esteems this virtue, and everyone desires to be known for it, won't it be expected of a priest? What is our profession, our job? It is to be saints, virtuous and perfect. This is our duty, our scope and our end.

Let us take a priest. He is very jovial and gives good company. He talks about everything as much as you want. But the moment you talk about things in which there is a shadow of sin ... that is a delicate matter for him and he refuses to speak. And this should be said of every priest! What is more disgraceful for a priest whose profession is to be virtuous and holy (hate sin) than seeing him contaminated by sin, being careless about its dangers, stained by it, and yet living cheerfully as if he had the purest conscience in the world? He can be compared to the sun developing dark spots blocking its

own light! He can be compared to a courtier (on duty in the service of the King) appearing in the King's presence shabbily dressed with dirty and torn clothes! It would be unforgivable! Here is our case: we are the light of the world. With our light, we are illuminating the many opaque and darkened bodies! In the presence of the Great God, we are destined to sustain and guard the decorum with the beauty of our vestments, i.e., the cleanliness of our hearts, and the clarity of our conscience!

St. John Chrysostom: The priestly candour should be such that it should not disappear even in the presence of the hosts of angels! How disgraceful it would be to find ourselves, the priests, in the presence of this Lord, stained and dirty like the others? What a sorry figure we will cut in asking the others to purify themselves while we ourselves are stained and dirty! The profession of virtues and holiness that we have taken upon ourselves; the sacredness of the house of God in which we live; the dignity of the functions and ministries that we need to dispense; the greatness of the God whom we are called to serve by being close to Him; -- all these demands from us a delicacy of conscience and purity of heart.

NEED AND IMPORTANCE

It is very dangerous for priests to be lacking in this quality. Do not be under the impression that there will be very few such! The Sacred Scripture, reason and experience affirm the contrary!

- **Sacred Scripture:** "He who spurns small things, will fall little by little." (Sir 19:1) One who is careless, one who does not evaluate/weigh petty things,

one who does it purely out of human respect, ... does not have the delicacy of conscience!

(2) Reason tells us: to the measure that the priest does not bother about his little faults & does not refrain from picking up new faults, it is natural that he loses the horror of sin or aversion to sin! The horror of sin is a brake to prevent us from falling into it. It is like playing with a lion cub. Little by little, one loses the fear of the lion. And without realizing it, he approaches a full-grown lion (without fear)! And you know what will happen: he will be torn to pieces! If the priest allows passions to increase, they will become more intense; the world's enticements will gradually acquire mastery over him. On the other side, the Lord will continue to tighten his hand and (I am not saying that He will withdraw His grace, but) specific special help, which is a temptation & assault, would have





"Every little thing in us, because of what we are [i.e., priests], become big! Trifles in the mouth of a layman are trifles, but in the mouth of a priest, they are blasphemy!"

kept him calm and constant since he has to deal with a priest who must be reserved, and is not delicate with Him, it will be difficult for Him to grant them, and what will happen in the end, which will happen sooner, or later, one way or another!

(3) Everyday experience substantiates the same. The priest who did not follow the advice & example of others, who blushed at being seen as delicate in manners and conversation, ... where did he end up? The priest who was not cautious and reserved when it was a question of looks, styles of dressing, etc., how did he end up? The priest who laughed at those who showed themselves cautious and reserved in matters of eating, entertainment, etc., how will he end up? The deplorable falls give us ample proof and explanation: It is impossible for

the priest to fall into mortal sin in the first impulse. When we see its beginnings, a significant fall is a tiny thing, not even an apparent fault! But there was a lack of delicacy in avoiding a danger or distant opportunity! St Jerome says: "Iniquity is eradicated in the seed." A slight affection, lack of consideration in fulfilling a duty of kinship, of society, of convenience – all these are lack of delicacy and hence fatal & dangerous. Finally, it cannot be less than a scandal. I have told you from the beginning that we, priests, are subject to very terrible & strict judgement (daily, continuously, always) by the world. It is the most severe judgment because it is usually done out of prejudice and hostility or by delicate, good people who notice even small faults and keenly observe us with a hundred eyes! An incautious & non-reserved word or look gives rise to suspicions, conjectures, and gossip, and it does not stop!

Let us take a priest who is not delicate in the way that I have explained, who does not guard himself carefully from every fault (which only appears to be a fault and in which there is a danger of a fault), and who does not care to make amends in case of a fall; who does not take notice of little things in speaking, seeing, avoiding, etc., how will he be able to do so and at the same time avoid scandal? True, they are small things, incapable of causing scandal, but listen to what St. Bernard says: "Every little thing in us, because of what we are [i.e., priests], become big! Trifles in the mouth of a layman are trifles, but in the mouth of a priest, they are blasphemy!" The Council of Trent confirms it. Our

quality as priests makes it serious for us while it is only light in a layperson; what is no sin for the layperson is a sin for us. So, a priest who is not delicate causes scandal!

(To be Continued).

