

SCRUPLES AT CONFESSION*

WALTER HILTON

Edited by CLARE KIRCHBERGER

Master Walter Hilton in a pistil made to a Christian friend newly turned to our Lord Jesu, which was troubled in his conscience, writeth on this wise.

TO thee dear brother in Christ our Lord send the spirit of counsel and of ghostly strength. Thou writest to me that thou art troubled and tarried of thy might and married¹ in thy conscience for thy shrift, for thou would shrive thee plainly of all thy sins and thou cannot, and therefore thy grace is withdrawn from thee. And thou makest this skill thereto.² Since shrift is the gate of all the sacraments and of grace also, and thou mayst not come to clear and plenary confession, how shalt thou then come to any other grace? And therefore I wot well thy soul is tormented and thy mind is in great bitterness. Forsooth nevertheless our Lord Jesus shall soften thy sorrow by his mercy when him likes. The sorrow that thou sufferest is great, nevertheless it is wholesome. Look that thou be strong of grace neither mistrust nor despair. Thou feelest thyself full of pride, thou canst not void nor tell it. Thou shrivest thy sins as they come to mind in time of confession, and nevertheless thou trowest not that thou art verily shriven. For thou feelest the same remorse after thy shrift as thou didst before, and peradventure more sharp. Thou beginst to ransack thyself and thy mirkness and blindness waxes ever more thick; in so mickle the more thou ransackest thyself, the less kennest thou thyself. Thou desirest light of understanding to

* MS. Brit. Mus. Add 33971, fol. 72 sqq.

I am indebted to Mr A. I. Doyle for the loan of the photostat of this MS., and to Miss J. Russell-Smith, who has pointed out that it bears some relation to an unedited MS. of a later epistle attributed to Hilton. Our MS. appears to be a translation and adaptation of the middle section of this epistle which was addressed to a lawyer friend. In it Hilton discusses his vocation. He was recovering from a time of sickness and imprisonment and Hilton suggests he should abandon his legal profession, not enter a monastery, but follow his vocation in the world. The part about confession occurs in the middle of the argument. Miss Russell-Smith points out that Bale said it was addressed to one John Thorpe, whom she identifies several times in documents between 1391 and 1461. But he may also have been a relation of the Carmelite of Norwich known to have lived between 1428-1440.—C.K.

1 married: hindered.

2 distinction, reason.

know thyself and thy sins, and by that thou seekest rest of thy conscience, and it flees from thee. Also thou sayest that thou trowest well in the sacrament of penance but in thyself is all the default, for thou canst not shrive thee in such form and such words as were needful, nor so declare thy sins as thou hast done them. And therefore thy soul is greatly troubled. And therefore thou askest if it be enough to say, 'I have been proud, I have been covetous in heart, in word and deed', and so to tell the common circumstances of pride and of covetousness and of other sins. Thou thinkest that it is not enough unless thou tell all the circumstances of thy sins, and thou thinkest that thou canst not do as thou shouldst, and therefore thou thinkest that thou receivest not the sacrament and art not assoiled (absolved). Also thou sayst for the third, that there are many sins that thou didst long since, and some of them are forgotten, some knowest thou not and of them wast thou never shriven purely and wholly, and therefore thou wot not what thou shalt do. Also for the fourth article, thou darest that thy sins are not forgiven in thy shrift nor in contrition before thy shrift, for cause that thy conscience bites thee as sore and sorer as if thou hadst not been contrite nor shriven. Also for the fifth article, thou sayest that thou hast more sorrow that thou canst not shrive thee of thy sins than thou hast for the same sins. Also thou sayst and writest that thou prayest and thee thinketh that it is naught worth. And thou sayst also that thou (canst) not pray for biting of thy conscience and mind of thy life. Also that thou art tarried and tempted as many new turned are, for when they feel such painful biting of their conscience after shrift, they trow not that they are soiled (absolved), and therefore they go again to shrift, oft and many times as (if) they would void vexations of their conscience by oft shrift, and nevertheless they find no rest of conscience, but the oftter they shrive them for that cause, the more are they travailed in conscience and blinded with that mirkness. And of that it falleth that they fall into deep heaviness, scarcely will they take any counsel remedy or comfort. These are the vexations.

Our Lord grant grace that the angel of counsel Christ Jesu send from above the spirit of counsel and ghostly strength, the which give his counsel in thy doubts and comfort and strengthen thee in thine adversity. Nevertheless trusting in the same spirit of counsel, somewhat will I answer to thee as our Lord will give me grace.

As to the first, wit thou well and trow verily that as the root of all sin standeth in this that a man's heart from God unchangeable and turned to the love and liking of a creature that is changeable by inordinate love,³ right so destroying, putting out or washing of all sin standeth principally and groundly in the turning of man's heart from the unruly love of any creature and full turning to God by very contrition and pure intent of the heart, therefore in the turning of the heart and the love to God; for from God standeth the ground and the beginning of all good and ill. But the turning of thy heart from God by unruly love and wicked will comes of thyself, and the turning of thy heart to God by love and good will comes of grace alone. But among the tokens of grace, a clear and evident token is compunction of heart, as uggsomeness⁴ of sin and misliking and sorrow for the doing, plenty of tears if they come, and a desire to please God; the which tokens if thou hast them thou feelest them, so that they may not be hid from thee. By these tokens thou shalt trow steadfastly that grace is infused into thee, and by the virtue thereof steadfastly trow that all thy sins are forgiven thee by grace. All sins, I say, but not all pain, for thou art born to pain for thy sins. Then when thy sin is done way by contrition, whereto doubtest thou of shrift? Wit well that God receiveth the turning of the heart and that accepteth he principally and alone. For if the heart be turned by very contrition, it is ready to confession by that same turning. Of this turning of the heart saith the prophet David: *Sacrificium Deo spiritus contribulatus, cor contritum and humiliatum Deus, non despicias.* (Ps. 50, 19.) A spirit troubled is sacrifice to God and thou shalt not despise a contrite and a meek heart. And in another place says the wise man: 'those things that are seen or heard or open to men, but soothly God giveth tent to thy heart'. For the forgiveness of God is white and smart,⁵ for the prophet saith: *Velociter currit sermo eius* (Ps. 147, 15), that is to say: God's word runneth swift. For the grace that it putteth in the soul by compunction, putteth away all sins and abideth not nor tarrieth not to the time of confession. For soothly, the mercy of Jesu cometh before in a plenteous grace and stirreth the heart to repentance, and in a moment ere the twinkling of an eye it washeth away all stink of

³ Possibly 'that a man's heart turning from God, etc.'

⁴ horror.

⁵ smart = promptly.

sin, were it never so old or customed. The ensample in the Gospel: Mary Magdalen, how stinking she was when she came to our Lord's feet, but while she washed his feet, wiped, anointed and kissed them, her self was washed and wiped from all sin and soothly she was anointed by grace and kissed by perfect peace between God and her.

See how soon the mercy of our Lord Jesus forgiveth; he abideth not the confession of the voice for he heard the confession and the conversion of the heart and that he desireth and abideth. And if I shall say the truth, he alone worketh that conversion⁶ and that contrition in the heart, and therefore he heareth soon that voice of the heart, which himself maketh therein.

Trust well that by all this I mean not to hinder confession, that God forbid! but I worship it and will keep it and praise it entirely and use it. But I mean to declare to thee a manner how thou shalt understand it. In confession and in all other sacrament are two things and these are the thing of the sacrament and the same sacrament;⁷ or else thus: the substance of the sacrament and the outward token of the sacrament. In the sacrament of penance the same forgiveness, the same reconciliation to our Lord, the same forgiveness of grace, it maketh thee of a manciple of hell into the son of grace and the heir of bliss, that is the substance or the thing of that sacrament. And this is given by our Lord by sudden turning of his eye of mercy, and in thee received by as sudden turning of thy heart to compunction and contrition. And this turning is of thy heart to compunction and contrition, and the turning is given⁸ sometime of the sacrament and sometime before the sacrament, or the tokens of the sacrament.⁹ In shrift are these two: acknowledging of thy sin by tongue, or in a dumb man by token of thy sin, and absolution of the same sin by priest. Then when thou hast the substance of the sacrament, that is forgiveness of sin by grace infused, thou art not fully siker but in the article of need of deadly sin, is my meaning.¹⁰

What shalt thou do more? Then thou takest the sacrament with the substance; thy sin is forgiven, but thou needest to meek thee

6 The text has 'conversacioun' which may be an error or correct in view of the next clause.

7 The thing is the 'res'. 'Self' is used for 'same'.

8 text 'forgiven' probably an error.

9 Possibly 'the taking of the sacrament'.

10 Obscure, perhaps 'yet thou art not fully sure except in the case of mortal sin'.

by confession. By the substance art thou reconciled to our Lord Jesu and to the Church over command of heaven¹¹ (?) and made a limb thereof; by the token of the sacrament art thou reconciled to Holy Church fighting in earth and made a limb thereof. See ensample in the Gospel. Our Lord raised up Lazarus but he bade his disciples loose him from his bands. The disciples gave not Lazarus life, for he was raised before, but they loosed his bands only.

Our Lord with his word alone giveth life. As in Lazarus bodily, so ilk day does our Lord ghostly. For when our Lord calleth a ghostly dead man out of the grave of ill conscience, in the which he is buried by wicked custom, life cometh as fast, and the soul is white and all the old stink of sin is away suddenly. Now the dead lives, now is he whole, what is then more to do? Soothly yet is he sent to the disciples, that is to say to the ministers of Holy Church. Whereto? that he be declared quick, to say Holy Church his mother, and that she was cause of joy, and to say, as the father said to his son in the gospel, when he came and sought grace: '*Gaudere oportet, quia filius meus mortuus fuerat et revixit*' (Luke 15, 32). That is, I am glad that my son which was dead is now quick again. And also that his mother Holy Church loose him of bands that he is bounden in. One of the bands is pain of purgatory. Of the which band the confessor looses the penitent, that is to say him who repenteth his sin fully, when he assigns him sufficient penance for his sin, if he do it. And beyond that, that he give him not full penance, he has power to release a part thereof by the keys of Holy Church.

Thou grantest well that thou trowest well in the sacrament of penance, that is shrift of mouth, and absolution of the priest. And thou knowest also the virtue of the substance of the sacrament, that is very contrition of heart, by the which God forgiveth the sin. But thou sayest: 'This is my woe, that I cannot express my sin as I should or as I did it.' And also those questions that thou askedst, as I rehearsed before, in the second article. To all this answer, thou art astonied with a weak dread, for default of faith. Trowest thou not that by infunding of grace into thy heart, by the which thou feelest compunction and misliking of sin, and a very purpose to turn thee from sin, with the help of God, that all the sin is forgiven thee and the filth of thy sin out of thy soul:

¹¹ 'by the command of heaven' or,

Then if thou with this wilt come to Holy Church and meek thee to the minister thereof, and thou in full willest to show all thy sin, with the circumstance, that thou (acknowledgest) them, without feigning or departing of thy shrift and also without excusing, putting away all shame, as meekly as is in thy power, without doubt thou receivest the sacrament.

If thou be letted that thou canst not, nor mayst not for the time shew them (the sins) each one by themselves, peradventure for hearty sorrow of them or simpleness or uncunning or forgetting or distraction of mirkness of mind that falleth on thee that time, yea in so mickle that thou canst not say but that thou knowest thee a wretched sinner, hugely proud, covetous, envious, wrathful and vengeable, and other sins thus generally, and hast mickle sorrow that thou canst not say them, I doubt not that this is enough, and thou receivest verily the sacrament. Forsooth our Lord looketh not after many words, but he looketh after a good will. He giveth no tent after mickle speech where he findeth a good will and a pure heart. Take ensample in the Gospel. Our Lord says to his disciples, 'When ye pray speak not mickle as heathen do, for they hope that their prayer is heard for they speak mickle. But when ye shall pray, say: *Pater noster, qui es in celis, sanctificetur nomen tuum, etc.*'

Behold our Lord blameth not that christian man that maketh speech in prayer, for himself teacheth them to pray in speech, but he blameth that man that trusteth in his fair words and crafty speech in his prayer, as if he should ask a prayer of a lord or of another man and trust that he should overcome him with fair speech or subtle skills. Right so in shrift, God is well paid that a man shrive him as well as he can. But our Lord blameth that man that setteth his faith in mickle speech and troweth not that he receiveth the sacrament unless he shew all his sins and each one of them by word, right as he trespassed. That is vain; but it is needful that a man tell his sins generally and specially, with such words as is true and pure, and sheweth soothfully the turning of thy heart and loathing of sin. And specially there is enough in spiritual sins that are far from man's wit, which is right fleshly (than in the fleshly sins). Do man that is in thee for the time of shrift, hide not wilfully nor excuse not, and that is enough.

(*To be concluded*)