

Discussion Guide for Reading Groups

The
SPIRITUAL
Combat

Lorenzo Scupoli

Resurrection Publishing



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LORENZO SCUPOLI

One Catholic voice on putting sin to death

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The Spiritual Combat — Discussion Guide
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This voice among four

How does the believer put sin to death? Christians have answered that question with shared seriousness and real difference of emphasis. This guide begins with Lorenzo Scupoli because it is made to help a group read *The Spiritual Combat* carefully, together, and all the way through.

Lorenzo Scupoli · one Catholic voice on that question.

Scupoli is one of four voices gathered around this question. Cassian's *Institutes*, Isaac's *Mystic Treatises*, Owen's *Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers*, and Scupoli's own manual belong in conversation: they share a concern for repentance, watchfulness, and life in Christ, yet they do not flatten their traditions into one answer. Let their kinship be a help, and their honest difference an occasion for patient attention.

This guide is for Scupoli's book. For a reading group, the Scupoli hardcover is available in a facilitator pack of 8, so each reader may have the work in hand.

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Facilitator norms

This is a conversation that may touch sensitive ground, but it need not become a place where anyone is pressed to disclose what they have not chosen to share. Invite candor; do not require it. A participant may speak from the text, from prayer, or from a question still taking shape. Silence is not failure, and no one is asked to prove seriousness by telling more than is wise.

Read the author with care before judging him quickly. Let people finish a thought. Ask what a passage says before asking how it applies. Where the group disagrees, name the disagreement plainly and return to the words on the page. The aim is neither to win an argument nor to make a display of self-knowledge, but to hear a Christian teacher faithfully and to seek the Lord together.

Keep Christ at the center. The counsel in these pages is not a set of religious techniques by which we repair ourselves. Faith looks to Christ, depends upon his Spirit, and receives the ordinary means of grace with humility. Pray at the beginning and end; make room for repentance and hope; leave one another with encouragement that is truthful, particular, and free of pressure.

Scupoli — argument map

Scupoli begins with self-knowledge and ends at the deathbed. Read the six movements in that order.

1. The foundation: distrust of self, trust in God (I–VI). True perfection is not found in bodily austerity or devotional busyness but in a war against one's own will, fought with four weapons: self-distrust, trust in God, spiritual exercise, and prayer. Self-distrust is not despair; it is the plain acknowledgment that no good arises from us apart from God. Trust in God is not presumption; it is confident reliance on the only source of virtue and victory. Scupoli treats the two as inseparable and gives a plain test for telling which one, if either, is actually at work: watch how a person takes a fall.

2. The powers put to exercise (VII–X). Before the fight can be waged well, the understanding must be guarded from ignorance and from a restless curiosity that judges by outward appearance, and the will must be fixed on one end alone — the good pleasure of God — even in the good and spiritual things nature is most tempted to enjoy for their own sake.

3. The manner of fighting (XI–XV). Man carries two wills, reasonable and sensual, locked in continual war for the reasonable will's consent. Scupoli gives concrete acts by which the higher will resists the lower and forms its opposite habit, counsel for the hour when the lower will seems to have won outright, and a plain warning: there is no truce available in this conflict.

4. The daily field (XVI–XXX). Combat is not occasional; it is the shape of every day. Scupoli walks the soldier of Christ from the first waking thought through the ordering of the passions, the sudden risings of temptation, the flesh, sloth, the senses, and the tongue — then teaches him to guard the peace these battles threaten, to recognize the devil's shifting strategy against both the holy and the enslaved, and to

refuse the delusion of imagining himself already advancing toward a perfection not yet fought for.

5. Virtue and prayer (XXXI–L). Even hard-won virtue can become the devil's next occasion for ruin, so virtue must be gained by degrees, one passion and its opposite at a time, prized most in its hardest opportunities. Scupoli then turns to the fourth weapon named at the outset — prayer — vocal and mental, reasoned and meditative, and, in his own Catholic tradition, prayer offered also through the Virgin Mary and the saints.

6. Communion and the final trials (LI–LXVI). Meditation on Christ's Passion opens onto the Eucharist, the fifth weapon, received sacramentally and spiritually, with thanksgiving and self-oblation, through both sensible devotion and dryness alike. Scupoli closes where every soldier's life closes: the daily examination of conscience, and the last battle at the hour of death, where the enemy's oldest weapons — against faith, against hope, against humility, against the plain truth of things — are named so that they can be met.

Session 1

Reading: Chapters I–IV

Where we are: Scupoli opens by clearing away every substitute for perfection — austerity, many prayers, exact observance — and locates it instead in a lifelong war against self-will, armed above all with distrust of self and trust in God.

Understand: Scupoli says true perfection lies in “the knowledge of the Divine Goodness and Greatness, of our own nothingness” rather than in outward practices, even good ones. What does he mean by our own nothingness, and why does he think such practices can become “greater ruin than open sins” for someone who mistakes them for the substance of holiness?

Discern: By Chapter IV, Scupoli gives a plain test: watch how a person takes a fall. Despondency and bitterness reveal hidden self-trust; a calm, unsurprised sorrow that returns at once to the fight reveals real self-distrust joined to trust in God. What would this test show about your own group’s usual response to failure?

Trust: Self-distrust and trust in God are named together as inseparable weapons — one without the other leaves a soul that either flees the fight or is overrun by it. Where does this pairing protect a discouraged believer from both presumption and despair?

Tip: Read Chapter I’s four weapons aloud before discussion — self-distrust, trust in God, spiritual exercise, prayer — so the group has the whole architecture of the book in view from the start.

Session 2

Reading: Chapters V–VI

Where we are: Scupoli exposes a common counterfeit — mistaking the restlessness and self-disgust that follow a fall for humility — then gives further counsel for gaining the two foundational weapons in earnest.

Understand: Scupoli says the fear and agitation many call a virtuous feeling after sin actually spring “from a secret pride,” because they show a trust in one’s own strength that has just been disappointed. How does this differ from the humble man’s response, who is sorry but “neither disquieted nor surprised” at his own weakness?

Discern: Chapter VI insists that no gift, grace, or long habit of service is ever sufficient on its own — every good work still requires God’s “especial assistance.” How does a group tell the difference between resting on this truth and using it as an excuse for half-hearted effort?

Trust: Scupoli tells the soul “heavy laden with sins” and making no visible progress to keep fighting anyway, because “no one loses in this battle but he who ceases to fight and to trust in God.” What does this promise offer someone who feels their effort has produced nothing?

Tip: Watch for the group’s temptation to treat setbacks as proof of failure rather than as the expected condition of the fight Scupoli has just described.

Session 3

Reading: Chapters VII–X

Where we are: Scupoli turns to the third weapon, spiritual exercise, applied first to the understanding — which must be cleared of ignorance and a curiosity that judges by outward appearance — and then to the will, which must learn to act for no other reason than to please God.

Understand: Scupoli warns that even our desire for good and spiritual things can be self-love in disguise, since we may crave the “satisfaction and rest” of willing what God wills more than we actually will what God wills. What distinction is he drawing, and why does he call it so easy to miss?

Discern: Chapter VIII names hindrances to right judgment beyond plain ignorance. How does Scupoli’s call to see things “as they really are” rather than by their outward appearance change what a group considers wise or foolish, honorable or shameful?

Trust: Scupoli’s remedy for a will divided against itself is not more willpower but purity of heart — habitually renewing the single intention to please God alone, even mid-action. How does this turn a discouraging inward struggle into something a person can actually practice?

Tip: Use Chapter X’s example of the servant who begins a work to please God and drifts into pleasing himself; it is a concrete case the group can test against its own habits.

Session 4

Reading: Chapters XI–XV

Where we are: Scupoli names the shape of the whole war: two wills, reasonable and sensual, contend for the reasonable will's consent, and he gives concrete acts for resisting the lower will, for the hour when the higher will seems overrun, and for the manner of fighting generally.

Understand: Chapter XII says we cannot be said to will something merely because the lower will desires it — the higher will must also consent. Why does this distinction matter for someone who feels attacked by a passion and wonders whether the attack itself is already sin?

Discern: In Chapter XIV, Scupoli tells the soul pinned by assault to keep declaring, “I do not consent to you,” even without the strength to feel resistant. What does this reveal about how he defines victory — as a felt state, or as something else?

Trust: Chapter XV insists there is no truce available in this fight, yet also that “the whole strength and wisdom of our enemies is in the Hands of our Divine Captain.” How do these two facts, no rest and no ultimate danger, work together rather than against each other?

Tip: Give this session the most time. Chapter XIII's method — resist, then deliberately re-provoke the passion to resist it again, then form the opposite habit by repeated contrary acts — is the engine for everything that follows; do not let the group move on until it is clear.

Session 5

Reading: Chapters XVI–XXIV

Where we are: Scupoli walks the soldier of Christ through an ordinary day: the morning muster, the order for fighting whichever passion governs the heart that day, sudden risings of temptation, the flesh, sloth, the guard of the senses, and the rule of the tongue.

Understand: Chapter XVII gives a simple rule of order: attack the passion that most governs your heart, and turn aside only to meet a closer threat before returning to the main fight. Why might a group that fights whatever sin feels most urgent, rather than whatever sin is chief, find its victories “few and imperfect,” as Scupoli warns?

Discern: Against the lusts of the flesh, Scupoli recommends flight rather than direct confrontation, even from “conversation which seems perfectly legitimate.” Against sloth, he recommends beginning the hardest task as though it were the only one, ten minutes at a time. Why do these two enemies call for such different tactics?

Trust: Chapter XXIV calls silence “a safe stronghold” and “the friend of him who distrusts self and trusts in God.” How does watchfulness over the tongue serve the same self-distrust and trust in God named at the outset of the book?

Tip: Do not let this session become a list of tips. Keep returning to Scupoli’s point that the daily field is one continuous war, not a set of separate techniques.

Session 6

Reading: Chapters XXV–XXX

Where we are: Scupoli teaches the soldier to guard the peace these daily battles threaten, then names the devil’s shifting strategy against the holy, the enslaved, and the fearful — closing with the delusion of imagining oneself already climbing toward a perfection not yet fought for.

Understand: Scupoli calls anxiety of mind always “displeasing in His Divine Sight,” springing “from some evil root of self-love,” even when its cause seems legitimate. How does he distinguish this restless anxiety from the calm, “tranquil sorrow” he permits over sin and suffering?

Discern: In Chapter XXIX, Scupoli diagnoses the delay “Not now, not now” as a snare rooted in resolutions built on self-trust rather than self-distrust. What makes a resolution to change different from what he calls “instant correspondence” with grace?

Trust: Chapter XXX warns against fixing your eyes on “some higher degree of perfection” while ignoring the enemy actually pressing at hand. Why does Scupoli treat this as a delusion rather than an ambition, and what does he offer in its place?

Tip: Let the group name, gently, where their own reading of this book could itself become the distant perfection Chapter XXX warns against — more resolution than combat.

Session 7

Reading: Chapters XXXI–L

Where we are: Scupoli warns that even hard-won virtue can become the devil’s next occasion for ruin, then teaches virtue to be gained by degrees, one passion and its opposite at a time, prized most in its hardest opportunities — before turning to the fourth weapon, prayer, in its vocal, mental, and meditative forms, and, in his own Catholic tradition, prayer offered also through the Virgin Mary and the saints.

Understand: Chapter XXXIII tells the reader not to divide virtues by day of the week but to fight the passion that has “always injured” them until its opposite is formed, since “all the virtues are so interlinked” that one true victory opens toward the rest. Why might scattering effort across many small resolutions work against this?

Discern: Scupoli calls difficult opportunities for virtue “precious,” even saying to ask God for patience is by necessity to ask for the tribulation that forms it. How does this reframe hardship without turning suffering into something to be sought for its own sake?

Trust: Chapter XLV describes mental prayer as sometimes wordless — “a mere glance of the mind towards God” in the heat of a struggle. How does this widen prayer beyond formal words into something available in any moment of the fight?

Tip: Scupoli’s chapters on prayer through Mary and the saints (XLVIII–L) are his own tradition’s expression of the same fourth weapon; read them as such rather than skipping past them or treating them as the chapters’ main point.

Session 8

Reading: Chapters LI–LXVI

Where we are: Scupoli’s book climbs to its climax: meditation on Christ’s Passion opens onto the fifth weapon, the Eucharist, received sacramentally and spiritually with thanksgiving and self-oblation, then, through sensible devotion and dryness alike, to the daily examination of conscience and the last battle at the hour of death.

Understand: Scupoli calls the Eucharist a weapon unlike the first four, because in it “we fight against them with Christ Himself; and Christ Himself fights against them with us.” How does this change what communion is for within the ongoing combat this book has been describing?

Discern: In Chapter LIX, Scupoli says both sweetness and dryness in prayer can come from nature, from the devil, or from grace, and that either state should be met the same way — by seeking God’s will rather than a feeling. Why does he consider dryness itself no proof of failure?

Trust: Scupoli closes with the four assaults at the deathbed — against faith, against hope through despair, against humility through vain-glory, against plain truth through illusion — and answers despair by teaching the soul to say, “Thou hast reason indeed... to cast me away for ever, but I have greater reason... to hope for Thy pardon.” Why does he place this scene, rather than a final victory, at the very end of the book?

Tip: Give this closing session room; the deathbed chapters are the point toward which every earlier weapon has been aimed, not an appendix.

Also on this question

If another voice would serve the group's next conversation, these editions take up the same question from different places in the tradition.

The Institutes — John Cassian

Patristic (West)

Cassian follows the desert tradition into the passions and their remedies: a slower, formative account of the fight against sin than Scupoli's daily manual of watchfulness. Find the hardcover or facilitator pack on the title page, and the discussion guide for this voice.

Mystic Treatises — Isaac of Nineveh

Orthodox

Isaac approaches the struggle through ascetical counsel shaped by mercy, prayer, and the healing of the heart, rather than Scupoli's day-by-day counsel for standing one's ground. Find the hardcover or facilitator pack on the title page, and the discussion guide for this voice.

Of the Mortification of Sin in Believers — John Owen

Reformed (Protestant)

Owen makes a concentrated doctrinal case for mortification as the Spirit's ongoing work in those already united to Christ, where Scupoli offers a practical manual of daily combat and devotion. Find the hardcover or facilitator pack on the title page, and the discussion guide for this voice.

Letters from Resurrection Publishing

If this question is yours, Resurrection Publishing sends personal notes from Harvey, our founder — on reading these voices for real groups.

Sign up for the letters: <https://resurrectionpublishing.com/l/g>

Close

Thank you for giving this demanding little book the time it asks of you. Keep Scupoli near enough to return to: not as a substitute for Scripture, prayer, or the Church's ordinary life, but as a serious companion in the work of learning to distrust yourself, trust God, and stand your ground.

If this question remains with your group, the other voices on it are in the Resurrection Publishing catalog as hardcovers and ebooks, each with its own free discussion guide. They are invitations for another season of reading, not requirements for completing this one.

This edition is for readers who want the work itself, not a summary.