

Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous (2013)

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In 1968, Fr. Don Miller, CSsR, founder of Liguori Publications and Scrupulous Anonymous, published “Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous.” It was an immediate hit. My 1996 revision was also well received.

Seventeen years later, it’s time for another revision. We’ve learned a great deal about scrupulosity since the original Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous were published, and these revised commandments may contradict portions of the first two versions. When this happens, I’ll offer pastoral direction to help readers understand the reason for the contradiction.

I hope these revised and updated Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous will be a useful tool for the spiritual formation of Scrupulous Anonymous members. The commandments don’t guarantee peace and freedom from undue anxiety, but practicing them is a step in the right direction. Trusting and believing in the power of God’s grace is much more healthy than letting scrupulosity guide our decisions. When we practice these commandments—not with perfection, but with normal human effort—they are channels of God’s grace and help.

Preamble

Commandments 1 through 4 focus on the sacrament of reconciliation.

When Fr. Don wrote the original commandments, he understood scrupulosity in the traditional manner: as a “manifestation of the tender conscience.” He believed the best treatment was good catechetical advice and direction from a skilled confessor.

Today, however, we know that scrupulosity is a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) with a religious manifestation and that catechetical formation will have little or no impact on a person with OCD-based scrupulosity. People with scrupulosity think and study about sin repeatedly, to little or no avail. You cannot think or study your way out of OCD.

What is required at minimum is behavior modification

that severely limits reception of the sacrament of reconciliation. Daily or weekly reception of the sacrament is not advised. It’s pastorally beneficial to limit reception of the sacrament to once a month at most; ideally, people with scrupulosity should receive the sacrament only during Advent and Lent, the traditional penitential liturgical seasons. The guidance and pastoral direction of a wise and understanding confessor and/or spiritual director is also essential.

Commandments 5 and 6 focus on behaviors and uncontrolled and unwanted thoughts that ignite concerns about sacrilege and/or disrespect for God and his saints. Both commandments address the fear of losing control: Commandment 5 addresses bad thoughts and desires, and Commandment 6 focuses on expression of feelings and emotions.

Commandments 7 and 8 focus on doubt, specifically the issues of resisting your confessor and his directives and confusion about obligations.

Commandments 9 and 10 address the seemingly constant fear experienced by people with scrupulosity and the need to put individual trust in Jesus, who is the way, the truth, and the life.



Without exception, you shall not confess sins you have already confessed.

Perhaps the most persistent experience of the scrupulous condition is doubt accompanied by never-ending anxiety: “Have I thoroughly and completely confessed my sins?” That’s why scrupulosity is often called the “doubting disease.” Doubt-generated anxiety deprives us of the peace of Christ, our birthright through grace.

When doubt and/or anxiety are removed from the equation, the scrupulous condition—although not healed—is significantly reduced.

Resisting the urge to confess doubtful sin or sins you’ve

already confessed is a pastoral remedy that will bring peace. When you refuse to engage the feeling of doubt and thereby resist the urge to animate and energize your scrupulosity, the wave of anxiety passes over you—and you can enjoy the peace that inevitably occurs. Yes, it is difficult. Yes, it is fearsome. Yes, it takes practice.

But it can be achieved, and the result is gratifying.



You shall confess only sins that are clear and certain.

This commandment gets to the heart of the scrupulosity struggle by directing the scrupulous conscience to accept that doubtful sins don't count. You needn't confess something that does not clearly and certainly exist. In fact, it's harmful to confess that which is doubtful. Such a practice is not at all helpful and must be resisted.

I can almost hear some of you saying, "I'm not sure whether I doubt that I sinned or that I'm trying to fool myself into believing that I'm doubting I sinned." Simply having that thought demonstrates your doubt. That's where this commandment comes into play: You shall confess only sins that are clear and certain.

Many people with scrupulosity think that people who don't have scrupulosity are somehow completely free of doubt. But it's a myth that a healthy state of mind exists in which everything is clear, black and white, and knowable without any sense of struggle. Some people do live in such a state, but they have a condition that's just as problematic as OCD.

Doubt is natural and normal. It's not an indication of sinfulness—it's an indication of humanness.

This second commandment also encourages clear and certain confession. The penitent states his or her sinfulness clearly and without hesitation, excuse, or innumerable details.

If the confessor is unsure of what you're clearly confessing, it's his responsibility to ask for clarification. If he doesn't ask for clarification, have every confidence that you have been clearly and certainly understood.



You shall not repeat your penance or any of the words of your penance after confession—for any reason.

Fr. Don Miller, who first published a version of this commandment in 1968, often saw people with scrupulosity doubting the efficacy of their confession unless they'd prayed or fulfilled their penance perfectly. Fr. Miller tried to reassure his readers that perfection was not required—that their effort, complete or incomplete, was all that was required.

By stating clearly "for any reason," I've strengthened the original commandment by eliminating the excuses people might use to repeat penance(s).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* clearly teaches that "Absolution takes away sin" (1459). Within the sacrament of reconciliation, it's the confession of sins and the absolution of the priest—not the perfect or imperfect act of the person who confesses—that take away the sin.

Penance is an act "performed by the penitent in order to repair the harm caused by sin and to re-establish habits befitting a disciple of Christ" (1494). It is distinct from the absolution of sin and the reception of the sacrament of reconciliation. Absolution is not dependent on the completion of penance, whether performed deliberately or accidentally, perfectly or imperfectly.

Let there be no confusion in this matter. The Church teaches that the only perfect remedy for sin—the only perfect satisfaction for sin—is found in Jesus Christ, "who alone expiated our sins once and for all" (1460). According to the Council of Trent (1551), as quoted in the *Catechism*,

The satisfaction that we make for our sins, however, is not so much ours as though it were not done through Jesus Christ. We who can do nothing ourselves, as if just by ourselves, can do all things with the cooperation of "him who strengthens" us (DS 1691, Philippians 4:13).

Even the most perfect act of penance performed with due diligence, without distraction, and with no stumbling upon words or concepts, would be imperfect. Only Jesus Christ, through his passion, death, and resurrection, is capable of the perfect act of satisfaction. We can participate in his saving action, but it's his saving action, not ours. It's not dependent on our thoughts or feelings; it's pure gift—sanctifying grace, manifested and received.



You shall not worry about breaking your pre-Communion fast unless you put food and drink in your mouth and swallow as a meal.

Much of the anxiety about breaking the fast before Communion centers on extraneous matters. For example, lipstick and lip balm aren't food. Prescription medicines aren't food even if they're flavored. Snowflakes aren't food.

You cannot break your fast unless you deliberately choose to eat in the same way you'd choose to eat a meal or a snack. No second thoughts are allowed regarding accidental swallowing of things that aren't considered food.

In any event, no penalty of sin is attached to the breaking of the fast. The fast is not a moral obligation as such; it's a devotional practice intended to show additional respect for the sacrament of the Eucharist in the form of holy Communion. Here's what *The Code of Canon Law* says:

919. §1. A person who is to receive the Most Holy Eucharist is to abstain for at least one hour before holy communion from any food and drink, except for only water and medicine. §2. A priest who celebrates the Most Holy Eucharist two or three times on the same day can take something before the second or third celebration even if there is less than one hour between them. §3. The elderly, the infirm, and those who care for them can receive the Most Holy Eucharist even if they have eaten something within the preceding hour.

That the Code itself notes exceptions to the application of the devotional practice clearly underlines the practice as a discipline of the Church. It's most certainly not a moral obligation that can't be dispensed with and that must be upheld with due diligence.

Even in the most enthusiastically conservative interpretations of this law in all the journals I consulted, I was unable to discover any reference to sin or any canonical penalty. All authors agree that the pre-Communion fast is primarily a devotional practice.

People with scrupulosity are not usually prone to carelessness in these matters and should free themselves with God's grace from the anxiety associated with this devotional practice.



You shall not worry about powerful and vivid thoughts, desires, and imaginings involving sex and religion unless you deliberately generate them for the purpose of offending God.

All people have vivid thoughts and desires. The power of human imagination reflects our ability to dream and create. Since it's a gift from God, imagination gives glory and honor to God when we use this gift in service of our brothers and sisters.

This powerful gift is deeply dependent on our sensory perceptions. What we see, feel, hear, smell, and taste is part of what it means to be a living being. It's how God intended human life to be.

For example, when we smell the aroma of freshly baked bread, we might take a deep breath to enjoy the fullness of the smell. We deliberately smell the bread, and we fully intend to enjoy the smell—the action has our full consent and is totally expressive of our intent and purpose. But our other senses don't shut down—as we smell, we also taste, feel, and touch.

What might happen if, taking a cue from the warm overall feeling we get from the fresh bread, our senses also express the same feeling we experience in a romantic moment? Does this new feeling—which is perhaps highly sexual—mean we've chosen to deliberately sin against God? No. It's simply a feeling being expressed by one part of our senses in response to another part of our senses. Only the sensation of smelling the freshly baked bread is deliberate; the other feeling is simply complementary and not intended.

This interplay between thoughts, feelings, imagination, and all of our creative and sensory responses is completely normal. This is the way God intends us to experience and enjoy life. People who don't experience life in this way have a severe physical and/or pathological illness.

Most of our experiences aren't as highly specialized and focused as this. Usually we're not focusing on one sensory expression but are rather experiencing the full range of such expressions in all we experience. Occasionally, as in the bread example, we deliberately focus our sensory skills on one particular activity or experience. Other times our sensory gifts focus our attention in a manner that isn't deliberate or freely chosen but is nonetheless fully experienced and perhaps even enjoyed.

For example, we take a break in the afternoon from work and walk outside for a quick breath of fresh air. Out of the corner of our eye, we see a young woman who is vibrant, full of energy, and very appealing. She reminds us of ourselves when we were about her age or perhaps reminds us of our beloved spouse, and we find ourselves daydreaming of a time long in the past. That daydream may bring back an emotional experience that was part of our relationship, and we're now vividly and powerfully remembering and enjoying it.

Did we somehow provoke this memory and choose to set our imaginations on a path that recalls the vivid details of a long-ago moment? No, we chose to take a walk and get a breath of fresh air. But complementary moments can occur at any time and place. To avoid them, should we choose out of an abundance of caution to eliminate such experiences from our life? No. That is most certainly not God's will.

When all is said and done, it's not the memory or the sensory perception that people with scrupulosity fear most. They don't even fear the sin.

What people with scrupulosity fear more than anything else is not being fully in control. Their error, which is not deliberate or sinful, is in perceiving that people who don't have scrupulosity are always fully in control of their senses, their imaginations, and their responses.

But nothing could be further from the truth. Part of God's creation includes the daily experience of not being in control of everything.



You shall not worry about powerful and intense feelings, including sexual feelings or emotional outbursts, unless you deliberately generate them to offend God.

Everything I've shared with you that concerns thoughts and desires is also directly applicable to feelings and emotions. Often a specific thought or desire is also accompanied by feeling and/or emotion. God gave us the ability to express our emotions, and doing so gives direct glory and honor to God.

On very rare occasions it may be appropriate to stifle a feeling or expression as inappropriate; however, it's usually healthy to permit feelings and emotions to be ex-

pressed. For example, it would be inappropriate to burst out laughing at an event in which silence is the expected and normal response. Such an outburst would be correctly identified as immature.

This commandment would be unnecessary if we were simply concerned about forming proper social skills. However, many people with scrupulosity choose to stifle, ignore, or downplay intense feelings and emotions for no other reason other than an aversion to feeling as though they've lost control. Many people with scrupulosity believe that loss of a persistent sense of discipline somehow displeases the Lord and that it can never be appropriate to be intentionally expressive.

But nothing could be further from the truth.

If a joke is funny, laugh hard. If you feel anger because you've been wronged, then anger is the correct response. If you feel sad and begin to cry, let yourself cry. Laughing, crying, and being angry are not sinful acts—not mortal, serious, or venial.



You shall obey your confessor when he tells you never to repeat a general confession of sins already confessed to him or another confessor.

This commandment encompasses three issues: repeating general confession of sins to your confessor, repeating general confession of sins to other confessors, and following the spiritual counsel of your confessor in all matters of conscience.

A key component of scrupulosity is the seemingly never-ending impulse to repeat certain behaviors based on the misconceived notion that if a single act—in this case, a general confession—is performed perfectly, all doubt will be settled once and for all.

If it were that easy to heal scrupulosity, we would encourage everyone to seek this kind of perfection and engage in this practice. But even if perfection were attainable, this practice still wouldn't be satisfactory, and it wouldn't free people with scrupulosity from fear and anxiety.

Repetition is not the solution. It's a harmful manifestation of the obsessiveness and compulsiveness that accompany scrupulosity. Obsessive and compulsive repetition

of a single action is unhealthy and counterproductive. Repetition is the disorder itself cleverly masquerading as an antidote to doubt, fear, and anxiety. It's the scrupulous conscience in action.

Confessors forbid repetition of confessions not to deprive penitents of sacramental grace, but because confessors understand that repetition is harmful and counterproductive.

The entire scenario is made more complicated by the second component of this commandment: when penitents try to get around the rule by seeing additional confessors. It's at least less than honest to seek out another confessor to engage in the repetitive behavior. It might even be a form of deceitful enterprise.

Repeating confessions, whether to the same confessor or a variety, is harmful and not conducive either to spiritual growth or the healthy management of scrupulosity. Repetition isn't an act of piety or devotion; it's an act of desperation that leaves both the confessor and the penitent unsatisfied and unfulfilled. The general confession isn't a sacramental remedy; it simply fuels the obsession and compulsion. The doubt returns with even more energy and potential for continued injury.

Related to repetition of confession is the impulse to repeatedly examine your conscience—to mine your conscience for sin. For people with scrupulosity, the examination of conscience is counterproductive. Engaging in either the examen or the general confession isn't recommended and shouldn't be part of your spiritual practice.

Leave all sins you've confessed in a sacramental confession in the hands of the Lord. Trust in his loving mercy and forgiveness.

A third component of this commandment is the directive to follow the spiritual counsel of your confessor in all matters of conscience. If you've established a relationship of confidence and trust with your confessor, remember that he has your best needs in mind at all times. He's helping you manage your scrupulous conscience. He's leading and guiding you with a patient and understanding heart. He's one of the avenues of God's good grace that's been given to you.

The consistent directive of the great saints throughout the ages and of all of the priest directors of SA over the years has been to follow God's spiritual counsel in all things. When you choose a path that isn't supported by

his strong and guiding hand, you take a step backward in your own spiritual growth and development.

It's most certainly not a sin to choose not to follow his directives, but it's counterproductive and not at all helpful.



When you doubt your obligation to do or not do something, you will see your doubt as proof that there is no obligation.

This commandment is based on the moral principle that doubtful laws and obligations do not bind the scrupulous conscience. The great saint and our patron, St. Alphonsus Liguori, taught that this moral principle is the “habitual will of the scrupulous person not to offend God.” St. Alphonsus was intimately familiar with the struggles of the scrupulous conscience. He understood that scrupulous men and women want above all else to please God. In the language of his century, this was called “habitual desire.”

For example, if a person doubts whether a particular holy day is a holy day of obligation within their home diocese—the person does not know for certain whether it is or is not a day of obligation—that person should understand that no obligation exists.

The reasoning behind this is that if the person knew without a doubt that it was a holy day of obligation, the question of attending or not attending Mass wouldn't even come up, because people with scrupulosity habitually seek to obey all the laws of the Church without question. (An example of this is Ascension Thursday, which in some dioceses is celebrated on that Thursday and in other dioceses is transferred to the next Sunday.)

The priest directors of SA over the years have been very reassured when they read the words of St. Alphonsus. As saint, Doctor of the Church, bishop, and moral theologian, he was (is) uniquely qualified to teach authoritatively on the formation of a moral conscience.

It's good to know that this very wise saint's teaching is so clear and straightforward. “There is no sin” are words we find most reassuring and words most scrupulous people are relieved to hear as often as necessary.



When you are doubtful, you shall assume that the act of commission or omission you're in doubt about is not sinful, and you shall proceed without dread of sin.

The purpose of this commandment is to free us from the paralyzing fear and anxiety that are often part of scrupulosity. St. Alphonsus says, “Scrupulous persons tend to fear that everything they do is sinful. The confessor should command them to act without restraint and to overcome their anxiety.”

In other words, people in the grip of fear and anxiety caused by scrupulosity should deliberately act against the impulse that paralyzes them and instead choose a path that could lead to health and freedom.

Alphonsus continues, “The confessor may command the scrupulous to conquer their anxiety and disregard it by freely doing whatever it tells them not to do. The confessor may assure the penitent that he or she need never confess such a thing.”

Alphonsus says the paralyzing experience of rigidity and anxiety is based on “groundless fear.” The fear and anxiety are not guilt or remorse felt as a result of an action or inaction on the part of the penitent. The fear and the anxiety are merely symptoms of scrupulosity.

The inability to judge the difference between the reality of sin and the fear of sin is a symptom of scrupulosity. St. Alphonsus says that when this happens, both the confessor and the penitent should presume that the power of grace is at work in the life of God’s people and not assume there is sin where no sin has occurred.

To sum it up: When making assumptions, assume grace, not sin.



You shall put your total trust in Jesus Christ, knowing he loves you as only God can and that he will never allow you to lose your soul.

One of the most powerful experiences we can have is realizing we’re loved by the Lord exactly as we are—not as we one day might be. When we experience this reality through the gift of God’s grace, we begin to experience the freedom and confidence of faith that come with this blessing.

This blessing is not reserved for a chosen few. It is intended for all of God’s people in all times and in all places.

To me, this truth is liberating. I’m already the person I am, with all my strengths and talents and with all my weaknesses and liabilities. To know deep within my heart and in the crevices of my spirit that God loves me exactly as I am gives me a framework for self-improvement and continued growth: I can grow when I’m invited to grow—not as a condition for love, but rather as a consequence of that love. God, who invites me to grow daily in his grace, doesn’t simply wait for me at the end of the journey as a reward for perseverance. He walks with me each step of the way.

For many people with scrupulosity, the experience of God’s love is often tainted and skewed by their very poor perception of who they are before God. Scrupulosity distorts the fiber of grace that enables the gift of God’s life and the gift of the Spirit, twisting them into an obstacle to God’s grace and life. When that happens, we experience God’s love as a cancer that must be removed.

But nothing could be further from the truth. God’s love sustains and nourishes us. God’s Word can remove the darkness that envelops our perceptions and judgments about ourselves and our relationship with God.

Begin with Isaiah 43:1–4. The words of the Lord will speak to you, reminding you that “you are precious in my eyes.” Follow Isaiah with Romans 8:26–39. Paul’s letter assures us that the Holy Spirit helps us in our weaknesses.

End your reflection with the first letter of the apostle John, in which he reminds us that love consists in knowing “not that we have loved God but that God has loved us” (4:7–19). This essential insight correctly places the emphasis on God’s love for his people and his creation, not on our own ability or inability to love. I find those words reassuring.

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