

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Scrupulous Anonymous  
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## Sin Boldly

by Thomas M. Santa, C.Ss.R.

*Be a sinner and sin boldly, but believe and rejoice in Christ even more boldly, for he is victorious over sin, death, and the world.*

Of the many words written and preached by Martin Luther during the sixteenth-century religious struggle that came to be identified as the Reformation, these more than many others provoked a vehement response. Luther was immediately taken to task and accused of promoting sin—not only sin, but *grievous* sin, the more the better.

And it wasn't just his contemporaries who hurled insults at him; the same energetic banter continues today. Do an Internet search for the phrase "sin boldly," and you'll be led to page after page of commentary and argument.

### ERP therapy

I recalled Martin Luther's advice when I was reading about the use of a behavioral therapy in the treatment of scrupulosity. The authors were describing the use of "exposure and response

prevention" (ERP). In this treatment plan, the therapist encourages the client to deliberately engage in behavior that provokes the strong feelings of fear and anxiety associated with scrupulosity. This desensitization therapy helps the patient learn to cope in a healthier manner with the increasing anxiety of scrupulosity.

For example, if the scrupulous patient is tormented by sexual feelings associated with reading material, the therapist gently leads the patient through a series of increasingly erotic stimuli. They might begin with advertisements in the Sunday paper and move through pictures from more risqué publications up to, and even including, pornographic pictures.

Unfortunately, as well-meaning as this may have been, the scrupulous person would often respond, "You are leading me from venial sin, to serious sin, to mortal sin!" ("Sin Boldly"). The therapist seemed to be insensitive to religious values, encouraging his patient to offend God. No wonder scrupulous people often end this therapy: "He was trying to make me lose my faith."



Therapists often respond by sharing ideas from the second part of Luther's famous statement. They say, "I'm not encouraging you to lose your faith. Don't you think God is big enough to handle this? Jesus is more powerful than any sin. Doesn't God want you to get better? If this is a way to do it, why not use it?"

## Adapting ERP

Does this mean no form of behavioral therapy is effective? No. Behavior therapy is rooted in good science. ERP is routinely effective in treating fears of heights and flying, but for the treatment to be effective for people with scrupulosity, it must be applied by a therapist with heightened sensitivity.

For example, to help a person overcome his fear of heights, it makes sense for the therapist to lead him to the fifth floor of a building, then to the tenth floor, then to the twentieth floor, and so on. The therapist needn't consider the patient's morals and values because there's no moral difference between the first floor and the one hundredth floor—they are both simply floors, and only floors.

Morally neutral actions and morally serious actions are significantly different. If, in applying ERP, the therapist disregards this difference, the therapy will be ineffective. Scrupulous patients assign a serious moral value to issues that are not in themselves serious. Everything is serious, and there is no such thing as an action that is not.

Therefore, the therapist cannot use actions

or situations that would be perceived as serious by a majority of people who are not scrupulous. The therapist must instead use only real-life situations perceived as serious by the patient—but *not by a majority of the nonscrupulous population*. Desensitization can be attained because the scrupulous patient will still confront real fear and real anxiety but will not be engaging in actual serious moral activity.

## ERP can work

Applied in a respectful atmosphere by a therapist who has done the necessary preparation, ERP is potentially very helpful.

For example, say we lived in a society in which it was culturally taboo to go beyond the fiftieth floor. What therapist would lead a patient beyond the fiftieth floor to treat her fear of heights if there were a strict cultural prohibition accepted by most people as essential? Wouldn't most therapists understand their goal to be helping their patient successfully navigate the first forty-nine floors only, assuming that few if any people would ever go beyond the designated floor? Of course. Is it also not reasonable to assume that this same kind of awareness and respect would be routinely applied to religious and spiritual boundaries?

*Scrupulous Anonymous* readers shouldn't avoid behavioral therapy that may be a source of real healing and effective treatment. ERP has a place in the treatment of scrupulosity as long as therapists who practice it are aware and respectful of the proper context in which to apply it.



# God Keeps Calling

The following is adapted from *Through Another Lens: Reflections on the Gospels (Year C)* by Barbara Jean Franklin, ASC (Liguori Publications, 2009).

**Reflect on these words of Sister Maris Stella:**

## It Is the Reed

*I did not cut myself this hollow reed,  
I did not seek it in the shallows growing.  
In all my life I paid but little heed  
To burnished reeds in the bright shallows blowing.  
And this that now is thrust into my hand  
Mysteriously cut and tuned for singing  
Was gathered in a strange and distant land  
And has immortal airs about it clinging.  
An unseen piper tuned its ghostly note.  
O who would dare to touch it—who would dare?  
From out the fearful hollow of its throat  
Such music pours as I am unaware  
How to devise. I did not think these things.  
It is the reed, it is the reed that sings.*

John the Baptist is crying to us from the wilderness to “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” As we remove the obstacles that stand in the way of our relationships with God and others, it’s good to remember we are instruments of God. No matter how sinful or broken any of us is, God keeps calling and has already built the highway that takes us back to God.

As we share Eucharist today, we become the Word and the Body and Blood of Christ, part of divine providence, part of the construction crew that smooths the way so “all flesh shall see the salvation of God.” The task may seem daunting, so it’s important to remember “It is the reed, it is the reed that sings.”



# SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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**Q** *I'm concerned about Lenten rules on fasting and abstinence. Some days I don't eat at all because I don't want to sin.*

**A** I understand your concern and empathize with your anxiety; however, the current rules for fasting and abstinence aren't complicated.

*Fasting* means a person eats only one full meal per day. In the United States, the obligation to fast applies to people aged eighteen through fifty-eight who are in good health and not pregnant.

*Abstinence* means a person doesn't eat meat. In the United States, the obligation to abstain applies to people aged fourteen and older who are in good health and not pregnant.

People who meet these requirements must abstain from eating meat on Ash Wednesday and all Lenten Fridays. On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, they must abstain *and* fast. Don't eat meat, don't eat between meals, and limit food consumption so that the quantity of food you consume at your main meal of the day (whenever that may be) is not equal to the food you consume at the other two meals. For most people this means eating a light breakfast, a light lunch, and a moderate dinner (no second helpings, no dessert).

If your anxiety is pronounced in regard to these simple rules, talk to your confessor about your Lenten penitential practices and come to an agreement that will be less stressful for you.

## **2010 Scrupulous Anonymous Retreat**

Friday, May 14, 2010 – Sunday, May 16, 2010

***Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, C.Ss.R.***

Redemptorist Renewal Center, Tucson, Arizona

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