

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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PART 2 OF 2

## The Joy of the Gospel

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

**I**n our February issue, we examined Pope Francis' exhortation *The Joy of the Gospel* (*Evangelii Gaudium*). The exhortation doesn't address the issue of scrupulosity per se, but it shows that the Holy Father is sensitive to the issues people with scrupulosity and other anxieties face with regard to celebrating the sacrament.

In this issue, I'll continue our reflection on this important document. I'll start by sharing part of a letter I received from an SA member:

*I'm terrified of some things the Catholic Encyclopedia says about probabilism and doubt, about how we must be absolutely certain or take only the safest route in some cases. I research the answers to doubts and questions, but sometimes I panic over things that don't really have an answer. I'm afraid of tempting loved ones into sin. They assure me they don't feel the way I fear they will, but then I have a scruple over whether I can trust them or should continue to dig for the presence of objective sin. How certain can we be?*

One of the perils of scrupulosity is the tendency to try to research our way out of it. Scrupulosity

has been described as a "thousand frightening fantasies" or "the doubting disease," because every researched answer will immediately be replaced with more questions.

*Certainty isn't possible for anyone.* It's not possible for someone in the grips of an obsessive-compulsive ritual, nor is it possible for someone who doesn't have scrupulosity. With respect to certainty, the only difference between people who have scrupulosity and people who don't is their level of comfort with it. People with scrupulosity believe that uncertainty indicates an incomplete effort or less-than-honest discernment, whereas people without scrupulosity are more comfortable with and accepting of uncertainty as a fact of life.

The compulsion for certainty speaks directly to the point of imputability and responsibility the Holy Father references in his exhortation. Quoting the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Pope Francis teaches that "*imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors*" (EG 44, CCC 1735).

For people with scrupulosity, the points for diminishment of responsibility are duress and fear—not ignorance or inadvertence. Duress associated with the fear of sin is an essential definition of the scrupulous conscience.

**P**eople with scrupulosity who have a religious manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder—and not simply a “tender conscience”—are some of the most God-fearing, honest, responsible people I’ve ever met. Their lives are defined by their desire to please God and to live as faithfully as possible.

Unfortunately, they don’t see themselves that way, and that’s the real scourge of scrupulosity: They see themselves as great sinners who don’t love God and who are always trying to wiggle their way out of serious situations and challenges. They don’t see themselves as loved; they see themselves as unloved.

The *perception* scrupulous people have about themselves is real—it’s not correct, but it is real. It’s exactly how they feel about themselves and how they experience everyday life. They cannot be talked out of it. They cannot be presented with enough evidence to the contrary. And even though this perception is wrong, it will probably be with them their entire lives.

Most scrupulous people won’t accept that they’re not responsible for what they think they’re responsible for. It’s ironic, and sort of weird, that the fact that they feel this way is proof that they’re not responsible.

One of the hardest things for people with scrupulosity to do is to accept their limitations—not the limitations they *fear* they have, but rather their actual

limitations. There is a distinct difference. People with scrupulosity fear that they are terrible sinners who are incapable of being loved and forgiven unless they make a herculean effort to overcome sin. But they must learn to patiently accept that their disease limits their ability to think well of themselves and to accept God’s love.

They must also patiently learn about their distinct fears and learn to accept the emotions that accompany those fears. Perhaps even more difficult: They must learn to accept their limitations not as God’s punishment, but a result of their illness.

**P**ope Francis teaches a central truth we need to hear and accept: “The Eucharist, although it is the fullness of sacramental life, is not a prize for the perfect but a *powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak*” (emphasis added; 47). For people with scrupulosity, this teaching means they shouldn’t deprive themselves of the Eucharist. They must resist this strong temptation because it unnecessarily deprives them of the spiritual remedy and medicine they need most.

Pope Francis also says that a “small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties. Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God’s saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings” (44).

We are all capable of small steps, and it is so reassuring to be reminded again that each small step is very pleasing to the Lord.

[ScrupulousAnonymous.org](http://ScrupulousAnonymous.org)



# ***Meditation for the Third Sunday of Lent***

The following is adapted from *Lent and Easter Wisdom From St. Alphonsus Liguori*, compiled by Maurice J. Nutt, CSsR (© 2011, Liguori Publications).

## **Woman at the Well**

With what kindness, again, did He *seek* the conversion of the Samaritan woman, and so, in fact, convert her. He first asked her for a drink of water, and then He said to her: “If only you knew what God is offering and who it is that is saying to you: ‘Give me a drink.’” (John 4:10) Then He revealed to her that He was the longed-for Messiah.

*The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*

## **Scripture**

*The Samaritan woman said to him, “How can you, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” Jesus answered and said to her, “If you knew the gift of God and who is saying to you, ‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him and he would have given you living water.”*

*John 4:9–10*

## **Prayer**

Living Water, I thirst for you. My soul is parched by the dry and arid sins of my life. I am tired and weary of the way I have been living. Meet me at the well of understanding. I need the gift of God that confirms I am truly a child of God. Give me your living water to drink so that I will never thirst again.

## **Lenten Action**

Today, take some time to note some of your good qualities. Write down these qualities and meditate on them throughout the day. Unlike the Samaritan woman at the well, don’t think of the things you have done wrong or the mistakes you have made, but rather consider the good things you have to offer.



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# MAILBOX

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NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

**Q** Every year I get tripped up with all of the Lenten rules concerning fasting and abstinence. Can you simplify them?

**A** Everyone 14 years or older must abstain from eating items made with meat on Ash Wednesday, Lenten Fridays, and Good Friday. People aged 18 through 58 must also fast on Ash Wednesday and Good Friday. (Canon law 1251 says we're to fast until the beginning of our 60th year, which occurs on our 59th birthday.) If you're sick, pregnant, traveling, or in a situation where it's difficult to follow these rules, make the adjustment you think is necessary and that reflects the invitation to enter more deeply into a spirit of conversion for the sake of the gospel.

**Q** I want a simple yes or no answer to a question about a moral issue. My confessor won't give me this kind of answer. Why not? I'm running out of patience.

**A** You should feel blessed to have a confessor who cares enough about you not to give you a yes or no answer just to satisfy you. Moral issues can be nuanced by specific circumstances and experiences, and he would not be representing the Catholic moral tradition if he gave you a simple yes or no. He would actually be doing you a disservice.

Go back and talk with your confessor about your issue. You will profit from the discussion.



## ***2014 Scrupulous Anonymous Retreats*** ***Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR***

***Friday, May 9 – Sunday, May 11***

Redemptorist Renewal Center, Tucson, AZ

For information, call 520-744-3400 or visit

[DesertRenewal.org](http://DesertRenewal.org) and click on "Events Calendar"

***Friday, Dec. 12 – Sunday, Dec. 14***

Perpetual Help Retreat Center, Oconomowoc, WI

For information, call 262-567-6900 or visit

[RedemptoristRetreat.org](http://RedemptoristRetreat.org) and click on "Calendar"

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