

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Scrupulous Anonymous
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Balance Your Checks

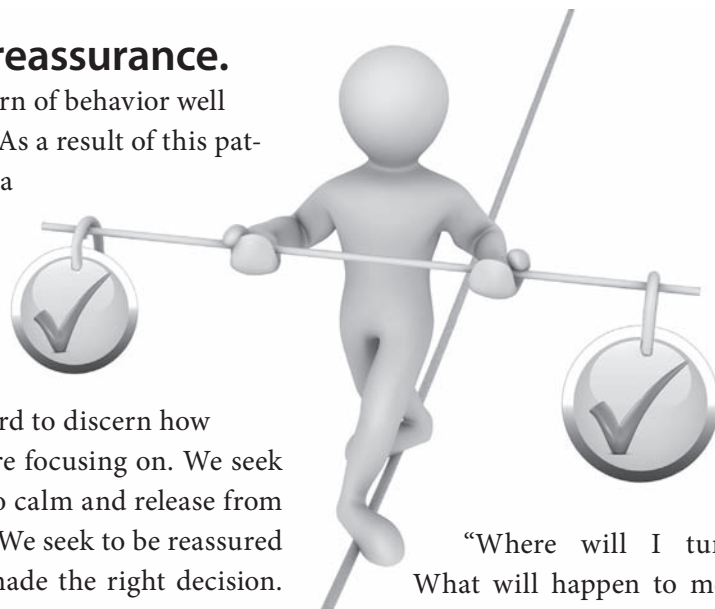
by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, C.Ss.R.

Check. Recheck. Seek reassurance.

These words describe a typical pattern of behavior well known to people with scrupulosity. As a result of this pattern of behavior, and in response to a lack of personal confidence, scrupulous people often seek a friend, a mentor, a confessor—even, on occasion, a casual acquaintance—to serve as a sounding board.

We check with our sounding board to discern how we're doing with specific issues we're focusing on. We seek not only help and direction, but also calm and release from anxiety, no matter how short-lived. We seek to be reassured we're on the right path and have made the right decision. But even as we receive the needed reassurance, our anxiety and our need for even more direction continue and never seem to end.

As we engage in this constant pattern of checking, rechecking, and asking for reassurance, we fear we're wearing out our welcome. We're often distracted by anxiety anchored in the fear that our relationship with our sounding board will soon wear out, burn out, reach its end. We fear we may well be set adrift, cut loose without the help we need.



“Where will I turn?
What will happen to me?”

We battle within ourselves and try to seek some measure of balance, some answer to the question, “What is appropriate, and what is not? How do I know my questions and concerns are welcomed and not just tolerated? Is this fear yet another manifestation of scrupulosity?”

TRUST AND PARRY

Saint Alphonsus Liguori, the patron of our scrupulous community, knew the many confessors in Naples, Italy. Whenever possible, he sought them out for advice, direction, and often confession. But this pattern eventually changed, and the behavior that was once played out again and again became less and less pronounced. Did he change his behavior, or did the confessors of Naples just slam their doors on Saint Alphonsus?

The answer, of course, is that a fundamental redirection in Saint Alphonsus, a change in his perspective and in his behavior, also affected his relationship with the confessors of Naples. With the help of God's grace, Saint Alphonsus determined that the anxiety and fear that energized his need to check, recheck, and seek reassurance, could be controlled.

He realized the key to stopping his compulsive behavior was to learn to trust his initial decision and then resist the compulsion to seek confirmation, to check and recheck again and again.

The key to being able to trust his initial decision, no matter what question he was addressing, wasn't that he became an expert on all details of every moral question or obligation. On the contrary, the key was to learn to trust his experience, to remember that his core desire was to love and to serve God each day to the best of his ability, and to believe in his own burning desire to faithfully serve God.

In other words, Saint Alphonsus learned to slowly accept and believe in himself as a person

who was loved by God, called into life by God each day, and given by God the grace to manage matters big and in small in all details of his life.

OH, THE GRACES YOU'LL KNOW

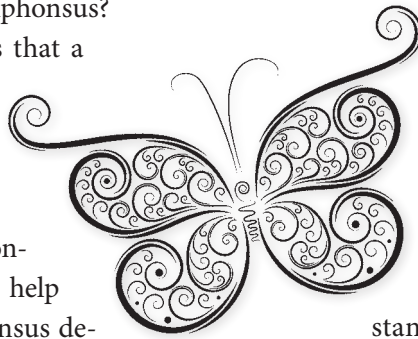
This growth of self-acceptance in a loving, faithful, and confident human being trying to do God's will doesn't happen overnight, and it most certainly doesn't happen when we're in the midst of the obsessive-compulsive rituals that are part and parcel of scrupulosity.

However, when we feel good about ourselves—when we're able to focus on the parts of ourselves and our experience that we've already learned to believe and understand as good, healthy, and blessed—we *can* learn to trust in the way Saint Alphonsus was able to.

And then slowly, day by day, we build on the inner wisdom and experience we already enjoy in certain areas of our life and trust that God's grace will slowly enable the healing we need to take root within us.

An appropriate spiritual focus, especially during our Church celebration of Holy Week and the great feast of Easter, is to ask God for the specific graces of trust and confidence. As we pray, we might use the words of the prayer that has become so synonymous with people in need of God's special grace of healing each day in their life:

God, grant me the serenity and the grace I need this day to know you, to love you, and to have confidence in your saving help.



Does God Love Me?

The following is adapted from *Understanding Scrupulosity: Questions, Helps, and Encouragement* by Thomas M. Santa, C.Ss.R., Liguori Publications, © 2006.

As if persistent thoughts aren't enough, as if a life burdened with unwanted thoughts and details isn't enough, yet another question plagues the scrupulous mind: *Does God love me?*

Most people at one time or another ask themselves that question. In any developing spirituality and awareness of God, it's necessary to ask that question and then come to a faith conviction that we are indeed loved.

When we ask ourselves the question, "Does God love me?" we're also asking ourselves, "Do I love me?" It's very hard for the average person to answer that question, but for the scrupulous it's even more difficult, if not impossible. "How can God love me when I have all these thoughts and feelings? Surely my life is displeasing to God."

Does God love me? To answer that question, the scrupulous person often determines the best choice to be a move from a position of questioning to a position of perceived strength. "I will *make* God love me by becoming perfect. That way God will *have* to love me."

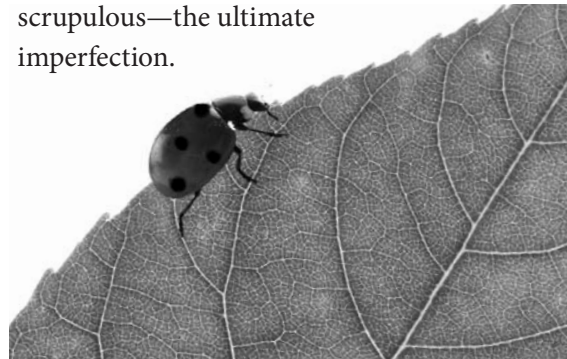
Scrupulous people waste an enormous amount of energy trying to "fix" themselves or trying to become perfect. I often ask people who come to me with such a preoccupation to try to refocus their energy and attention.

Instead of trying to make yourself pleasing to God, imagine how much more hopeful it might be to try to accept yourself exactly as you are.

Imagine yourself loved by God, not as you one day might be, but exactly as you are today, at this present moment, *now*, in love. Quite a challenge, and not just for the scrupulous person.

Most of us are willing to accept other people's faults, weaknesses, and other little irritations, but when it comes to ourselves, we become perfectionists. Suddenly every little fault, every little weakness, and every little irritation becomes a major obstacle to self-love and acceptance of who we are. In such an instance, we find ourselves repeating again and again, *If only I could become....*

People struggling with scrupulosity are often convinced God won't accept them until they're perfect. Of course, this desire for an impossible perfection is a manifestation of scrupulosity and an indication of how the affliction affects the decision-making process. It's ironic that the time and energy spent trying to be perfect to please God must be redirected to learning not to be scrupulous—the ultimate imperfection.





SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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Q *I keep thinking about sins of my adolescence and young adulthood. I tried to make a general confession, but my confessor said that will only keep me on the treadmill of scrupulosity. What do you think?*

A Your confessor is very wise. Your question clearly illustrates yet another reason scrupulous people should choose a regular confessor who knows that another general confession won't help, because the same old doubts and fears always return. The challenge for scrupulous people is to place absolute trust in the forgiveness of Jesus as celebrated in the sacrament of reconciliation. Anything short of that won't bring peace.

In addition, if you keep jumping from one priest to another instead of following the advice of one, you'll never learn to trust in

the absolute power of forgiveness. You'll be condemning yourself to a life of brief interludes of peace but never achieving sustained healing. Only a regular confessor makes this possible.

Q *If I forget the penance the priest gives me, is my confession still valid? Must I go back to the priest and tell him I forgot my penance?*

A Your confession is still valid—no need to go back. Just do your best to recall the penance. More often than not, the penances we receive are pretty standard. If I forget my penance, I perform a penance I received at a previous confession. What God desires from his people is the willingness to be reconciled, the firm purpose of amendment, and the openness to do God's will.



Attention Readers!

Fr. Westly and Fr. Santa are no longer able to respond to individual letters, and the sa@liguori.org e-mail address *has been closed*. We will, however, continue to answer commonly asked questions in *Scrupulous Anonymous*. Send your questions to SA Mailbox, One Liguori Drive, Liguori, MO 63057.

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