

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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One Liguori Drive  
Liguori, MO 63057-9999  
[www.liguori.org](http://www.liguori.org)

## Clinging to a Life Raft

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

One of the best-loved motion pictures in recent history is *Titanic* (Twentieth-Century Fox, 1997). In retelling the story of the 1912 sinking of the famous passenger ship, writer/director James Cameron captured the sheer horror of what it must have been like to be on this doomed ship, surrounded by frigid waters and almost certain death.

In one of the movie's most powerful scenes, the two lovers central to the story cling to a life raft capable of supporting only one of them. After a few minutes, the young lover Jack releases his grip and sinks slowly to his death in the frigid ocean.

I recently realized that the image of a life raft bobbing with such fragility in the sea is a good metaphor for the experience of scrupulosity. Because it's so powerful, so unrelenting, and so isolating, it encourages people who

have it to see themselves as drifting alone in an angry sea of deadly sin and temptation.

When the sea is so frightening and the possibilities for a swift and sudden demise are perceived as very real, who among us wouldn't grab the first "life raft" we see and cling to it as tightly as possible? At such a moment of perceived peril, doing so might seem to be the most logical and potentially the

healthiest action. But sometimes clinging to the first life raft on the scene isn't the best decision. Sometimes we need to let go of even that which seems to sustain life, stare into the deep and cold water, and swim to some other unseen, distant shore.

In *Titanic*, clinging to the life raft is the only choice. That's often the way movie plots unfold: The protagonists have clear choices that move the plot along at a good clip so the audience doesn't get bored. But real life isn't



like that. In real life the script isn't predetermined, we're not actors in some cosmic play, manipulated for the pleasure of the "gods." In real life the best choice, the most helpful choice, many times means letting go of the familiar script and taking a chance.

Repetitive rituals, compulsive behaviors, stubbornness, and even people and events can be the life rafts of scrupulosity. We cling to these manifestations of perceived safety and security because they buoy our spirit and make us feel better. The thought of letting go or resisting the urge to no longer cling to our metaphoric life raft fills us with anxiety and uncertainty.

**L**ife rafts, real or metaphoric, are not a permanent solution. They're intended to be temporary—useful for a short time until something more stable appears. We'd think someone foolish if she continued to cling to her life raft even though a boat had arrived or she'd made it to land, but that's what we often do. We cling, we hug closely to our chest, and we resist all invitations to let go and chart a different course. Some of us cling so tightly to our life raft that even when it loses air and sinks into the ocean, we keep clinging to it even though



it's no longer of use.

Once we decide to let go of the life raft and navigate the challenging waters, another life raft may soon appear. It may be different from the one we just let go of, but it's a life raft nonetheless. It can be tempting to cling to the new raft as tightly as we clung to the last one. Yet, as appealing as the new raft can be, it won't lead to a healthier life either. It will take even more commitment and purpose to let this new raft slip from our grasp and continue the dangerous journey to the shore that seems so far away.

Fr. Pat Kaler, CSSR, was committed to counseling and encouraging the members of our SA family. Before he died, even as he struggled with monumental health issues, he tried to keep pace with the demands of this important ministry. In the days following his death, the vast majority of the phone calls that flooded our offices were from people who felt they'd lost their only support and who were now forced, through no fault of their own, to chart the dangerous and challenging waters of scrupulosity alone. Many were frantically looking for another person to cling to, another person to provide the support they'd become accustomed to; however, no one could step into this role.

Some people became quite animated and angry, but others realized that Fr. Kaler's death presented an opportunity to let go, to navigate their illness with the many tools available to them.

Yes, it was frightening, but in the long run it was a very good decision—and well worth the effort and struggle.

# Protection

The following is adapted from *Filling the God-Shaped Void: A Book of Daily Meditations* by Penny Mary Hauser, MSN (Liguori Publications, © 2012).

**Sunday** We hear a lot about identity theft these days, but when we live in the Spirit, we have “identity protection.” Spiritual identity protection intervenes when forces around us and within us try to rob us of our identity. The guilt that floods us when we’ve done something wrong, the regrets that overwhelm us when we review our lives, the weaknesses that constantly trip us up, the inadequacies that often make us look like fools—each of these things threatens our identity.

But the Spirit will not allow that. The Spirit will not allow the guilt within us or the world around us to define who we are. We needn’t think of ourselves or present ourselves as worthless, miserable failures who have no right to take up space on the earth. The Spirit says otherwise.

Consider the words of Saint Paul: “The Spirit itself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Romans 8:16).

Listen to the Spirit as he whispers in your ear: You are God’s precious child. God has redeemed you and made you his own. You have infinite worth. Listen to the Spirit and walk with your head held high.

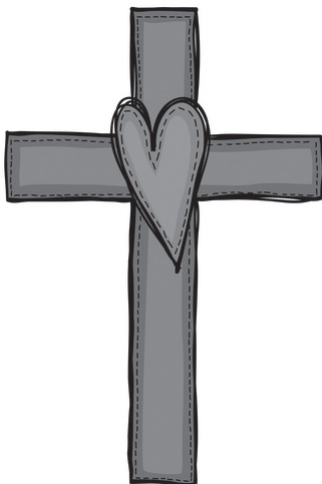
**Monday** When our identity is stolen through credit cards or bank statements or online accounts, it’s a mess. It takes incredible paperwork and phone calls to clarify who we really are and often to reestablish our credit. And then, just in case it might happen to us again, we have to spend money to buy identity protection.

But that is not how it is with God. He knows who we are, and he never forgets. As Psalm 139 says, “My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret.” God has known who we are from the very beginning: “You know when I sit down and when I rise up.... Even before a word is on my tongue, O Lord, you know it completely.” God knows our identity forever and ever. It

can never be stolen from him.

Next time you hear a commercial or see an advertisement about identity theft, remember, “O Lord...you search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.”

Do you worry that God doesn’t know who you are? Remind yourself today that he has known you from the beginning.





SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS

# MAILBOX

ONE LIGUORI DRIVE • LIGUORI, MO 63057-9999  
NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

**Q** *I've discovered a behavioral therapist who has been very helpful, but she's not Christian. May I still take her advice?*

**A** Yes, by all means. Although scrupulosity has a religious component, the behavioral issues must also be addressed, and a trained therapist can be very helpful with that.

The potential conflict occurs when the behavioral practice seemingly "rubs up" against the perceived religious value. If this happens, seek clarification from your confessor or spiritual director, who will be very encouraging and supportive.

**Q** *What are the minimum requirements for a valid confession?*

**A** That is easy to answer: 1) sin and contrition on the part of the person celebrating the sacrament, and 2) a validly ordained priest in good standing who has received faculties from the local ordinary (bishop) to absolve people of sin.

In an emergency, the second requirement becomes more generous: any priest—in good standing or not, active or inactive—can validly hear your confession and give absolution.



## OCD RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

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