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The Spiraling Experience of OCD

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

Realtors often say that an essential component of good property is “location, location, location.” Location is so essential that it makes little difference whether the property is for a home or a business. Location determines the initial price and often how the property grows or decreases in value over the years.

The scrupulosity equivalent of “location, location, location” is “context, context, context.” Context is so essential that it makes little difference what the question or the subject is. Yet context is eliminated when we narrowly focus a question or topic.

The compulsion to do this is very compelling, but if we’re able to resist it we’re more likely to make a better decision or get a better answer. If, on the other hand, context is minimized or eliminated, the answer is potentially skewed and perhaps even harmful.

Think of a whirlpool in a stream or lake. The bottom of the whirlpool spiral whirls and whirls in ever-tighter circles, spinning many more times per second at the bottom than at the top. It looks as though a lot more energy is expended at the bottom

of the spiral than at the top, but that’s an illusion. The spiral actually uses the same amount of energy from top to bottom.

People caught in the spiral of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and scrupulosity are experiencing the bottom of a spiral. OCD behavior channels energy into tighter and tighter—and by extension, much more restrictive—spirals. The larger context is gradually eliminated as we focus on the smallest possible component of the experience. We become convinced that the smallest component is the most important. One small part that is out of place or imperfect destroys and effectively changes the larger experience and makes it severely and permanently flawed.

If the component is a question, a moral issue, or a challenge, the flaw can lead a person into mortal sin, which brings the most permanent and most damaging judgment possible: condemnation for all eternity.

Of course, mortal sin isn’t really an issue; it’s the fear of sinning that is paramount at this point.

The smaller and more focused the question, anxiety, or fear, the more the context has been mini-

mized. Instead of understanding the struggle within a larger context, which might explain some of the emotion, any possibility of another interpretation or understanding is eliminated. All that remains is the feeling of spiraling out of control.

The men and women who attended a recent Scrupulous Anonymous retreat have experienced what it means to be human in a tightly constricted whirlpool of energy. They've found themselves, despite their best efforts, being dragged deeper and deeper into a spiral of despair.

Some were convinced there was no way out of the spiral. Still others held out hope for a miracle that would release them from torment, fear, and anxiety.

As I listened, I understood clearly that nothing I offer will free them from this experience. All my answers, all my supposed wisdom, means absolutely nothing to a person in the grips of this experience.

I also realized that the people who shared their stories didn't expect me to heal them. They appreciated that I was struggling to understand the experience, but what they really wanted to know was that despite their pain and real torment, they are loved and accepted by God."

People trapped in this spiraling experience of OCD and scrupulosity want to be assured that God isn't inflicting this experience on them. They need to be assured that they aren't being singled out for torment or punishment. And they are not. Scrupulosity is a cruel juxtaposition of pathology, biology, and

psychology that's no different than any other illness or disease. It has nothing to do with their inherent goodness, and it most certainly is in no way a predictor of their worthiness for salvation.

I was able to assure the people at the retreat that they are loved and accepted by God exactly as they are, not as they one day might be. I tried to lead them to a place where they might feel free enough to risk perceiving their life and their religious experience in a different way. "Widen the picture" and "change the context" are mantras that offer hope of healing, which is a concrete manifestation of the grace of God at work.

It's worth the effort to learn behaviors that help you resist the spiral. Several people said they now had the confidence to try. It was understandable that others were just too discouraged and exhausted by the constant effort and feared that any effort on their part would be useless.

Despite the obvious and persistent power of the OCD spiral that powerfully draws each person with scrupulosity deeper and deeper into minute detail and the fear and the anxiety that is part of the experience, the power of God's grace isn't helpless or ineffective. The powerful feelings of hopelessness do not signal defeat or uselessness.

Yes, the struggle is intense. Yes, the struggle is at times overwhelming. But God's grace will prevail.

Nothing can change the ultimate destiny of the people of God manifested by the power of the Spirit.

ScrupulousAnonymous.org



Introducing

Understanding Scrupulosity

a live radio call-in show with **Fr. Tom Santa**, author of *Understanding Scrupulosity* and the free monthly *Scrupulous Anonymous* newsletter. We encourage anyone with questions about scrupulosity to listen and call in.

The show airs Wednesdays at **2 pm Eastern Time** on Radio Maria USA.

To listen: Go to radiomaria.us/about/ and click on Listen Live

To call in: 866-333-MARY (6279)



2014 Scrupulous Anonymous Retreat Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

Friday, Dec. 12 – Sunday, Dec. 14

Perpetual Help Retreat Center, Oconomowoc, WI
For information, call 262-567-6900 or visit
RedemptoristRetreat.org and click on "Calendar"



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS

MAILBOX

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Q *I am one of your faithful readers with OCD/scrupulosity. I read and reread your newsletter and have come to realize that asking you the same question over and over again and expecting a different answer is truly insanity. What a grace to finally understand that this compulsion to bombard you (or my confessors) with questions is counterproductive.*

A Thank you for your willingness to share this insightful understanding of how scrupulosity and OCD are manifested. You are absolutely correct. I imagine you suffered for a very long time before you were able to come to this conviction.

Your understanding is a manifestation of the grace of God at work in your life. Be thankful that you were able to cooperate with the Spirit of God as you claimed this truth for yourself. Please be constantly vigilant so as not to fall back into the trap of old behaviors that are not helpful.

Q *When I receive holy Communion and look around at the people who are not receiving it, I start to feel guilty. I think, "Why aren't these people receiving holy Communion?" They certainly are more holy and worthy than I. Is this a common thought for people with OCD, or is this prevalent among "normal" people too?*

A This kind of judgment is probably not limited to people who struggle with OCD or any other manifestation; rather, it's reflective of people who tend to make judgments about others' behavior. Some people are quick to judge, while others are basically unaware of or indifferent to what others do.

The only part of your response that could be indicative of scrupulosity might be your willingness to assume the reason is that the other person is more holy. Perhaps he or she isn't Catholic and is just visiting the church.

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