

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Scrupulous Anonymous  
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## Strength in Weakness

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

In 1691, Anglican Bishop John Moore of Norwich, England, made the first known public acknowledgment of scrupulosity, which he referred to as “religious melancholy.”

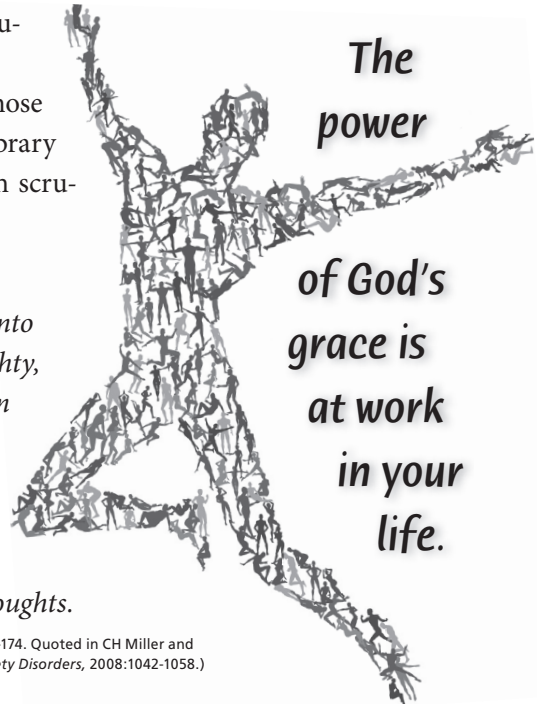
Bishop Moore, a well-educated and well-read man whose personal library of books is today known as The Royal Library collection at Cambridge University, described people with scrupulosity as having

*a flatness in their minds...which makes them fear, that what they do, is so defective and unfit to be presented unto God, that he will not accept it...[They experience] naughty, and sometimes Blasphemous Thoughts...[which] start in their Minds, while they are exercised in the Worship of God...[Despite] all their endeavors to stifle and suppress them,...The more they struggle with them, the more they encrease....They are mostly good People...for bad men...rarely know anything of these kind of Thoughts.*

(G Mora, 1969, The Scrupulosity Syndrome, *International Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 5, 163-174. Quoted in CH Miller and DW Hedges, "Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis," *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 2008:1042-1058.)

What is interesting about this quote isn't only its age, but also the bishop's insight: "they are mostly good people." Oh, if we could only believe—and deepen that belief every day—that scrupulosity should not be understood as something that makes us bad.

But here we are, all these years later, still struggling with the idea that the scrupulous condition somehow indicates the state of our souls and of our relationship with God. Despite this common perception, I sense change and some improvement in my life, and perhaps you do also.



## PERFECTLY IMPERFECT

It has often been hard for me to believe I'm loved by God exactly as I am and that the love God has for me isn't dependent on some future moment of perfection. It's often been a struggle for me to embrace my human condition—to acknowledge my faults and my failings—while learning not to dwell on them or perceive them as something that separates me from God.

Some days I have a sense of peace and well-being. Others I don't. But I've had more days of peace since I realized what the bishop pointed out: *My struggle to love God—and my desire to be in a relationship with God—is a gift that in itself shows I'm connected with God.* If, in the words of the bishop, I were a “bad man,” I wouldn't be concerned with my relationship with God. I wouldn't give it a thought.

In other words, even the thoughts and feelings I struggle with are proof of my love for the Lord and the Lord's love for me.

This insight has made it easier to accept even the thoughts and the distractions that come to me unwanted and unwelcomed, each of which can deprive me of peace and tranquility. When such thoughts occur, instead of wasting my energy sustaining them, I put it to good use suppressing them. Then I remind myself that I *do* love God, and that God *does* love me.

This response doesn't take away the pain of the struggle, and it doesn't eliminate my anxiety, but it does help put it into perspective. When my frame of mind is improved and I'm able to understand what I'm experiencing, I'm enabled by God's grace

to take a single small step in the direction of healing and wholeness.

## FINDING THE MISSING PEACE

As I write these words, I'm also painfully aware that some people with scrupulosity have no moments of peace and tranquility—*not one moment of rest or respite.*

If you honestly experience moments of at least some peace and some freedom from anxiety, be thankful and say a prayer to God acknowledging the power of his grace at work in your life.

If, on the other hand, you never have peace, please know it's not because you're a bad person. Please know it's not because you're buried in sin. Please know it's not because you don't love God or because God is displeased with you.

It's much more helpful to recognize and acknowledge that something else is going on with your spiritual journey and that the healing you seek requires additional help and direction.

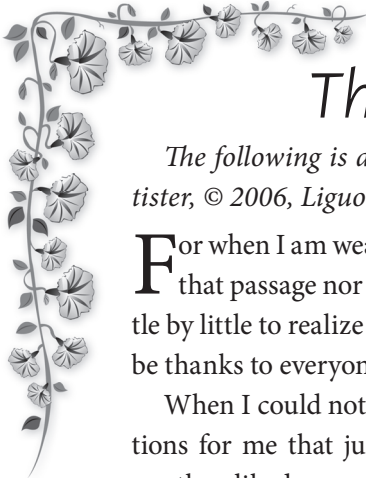
Until recently, scrupulosity was thought to be a manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) or obsessive-compulsive personality disorder (OPCD), but additional research may show scrupulosity to be a separate type of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

The research is still in the beginning stages, but an effort is underway to identify and study the various aspects of scrupulosity, which are currently poorly organized and not sufficiently understood. I'm personally encouraged by this focused research, and I hope each of you will also feel encouraged as a result of this new effort.



## PRAYER

*Loving God, help me this day to rest, for at least a few moments, in your loving embrace. Let me rest even though my mind is racing and filled with anxiety and doubt. Let me trust, even in my imperfection, that you love me this day, exactly as I am. Help me strive for perfection as you have called me to do, but grant me the grace not to be overwhelmed with the struggle and to be satisfied with the progress even if it is slow and at times unsatisfactory. I offer you this prayer in faith and in the confidence you've given me in the name of Jesus your Son. Amen.*



### *The Glories of Weakness*

*The following is adapted from In Search of Belief: Revised Edition by Joan Chittister, © 2006, Liguori Publications.*

**F**or when I am weak, then I am strong,” Paul writes (2 Cor 12:10). I never understood that passage nor did I like it until, struck with polio as a young woman, I began little by little to realize that if I ever walked again, it would not be thanks to me. It would be thanks to everyone around me who formed the human chain that kept me human.

When I could not move, they carried me. When I could not work, they found functions for me that justified my existence. When I could not find a reason for going on, they liked me enough to give me back a sense of human connectedness. When I could not cure myself, they cured me of the clay of my limits and turned them into life again.

They taught me the glories of weakness for both of us. When I most of all wanted to be strong and like no other time in life found myself defined by my weaknesses, I began to understand the great question of life. If I do not need other people, what can I ever learn? And if I do not need other people, what is their own purpose in life, what is their claim on my own gifts when they need me as I have needed them?

The moment I come to realize that it is precisely the gifts which I do not myself embody that make me claimant to the gifts of others—and they of mine—marks the moment of my spiritual beginning. Suddenly, creaturehood becomes gift and power and the beginning of unlimited personal growth.



# SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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**Q** *When I'm faced with a decision or confusing matter of conscience, I ask a particular saint to inspire me with a sign. If I come across the sign within a certain period of time, I take that to be my answer. On several occasions I've had questions answered through rather uncanny—and thus convincing—signs. But other times the signs seem contradictory or ambiguous. Is this a wise practice?*

**A** No, this is not a wise practice. The Lord gave us the saints to inspire us and to be witnesses of his love, not to make up our minds for us or take responsibility for our decisions. No wonder you feel the signs are often contradictory or ambiguous. The discernment of God's will often demands hard work and patience. There are no shortcuts in the process of discernment.

**Q** *I asked a priest if a certain matter was a sin, and he said it wasn't. Then I asked another priest the same question. According to the Church, and for a right conscience, is one priest sufficient to consult?*

**A** A person with scrupulosity should not ask more than one priest for advice in matters of conscience. Asking only one priest fulfills your obligation to form a right conscience. When you go from one authority figure to another asking the same question and then comparing their answers, you're acting obsessively and compulsively. *The questioning itself* is a manifestation of scrupulosity. Each time you seek out another person you make yourself even more anxious and upset. I strongly counsel you to seek the advice of one person you feel you can trust. Then let it rest.



### **Attention Readers!**

Fr. Westly and Fr. Santa are no longer able to respond to individual letters, and the [sa@liguori.org](mailto: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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