

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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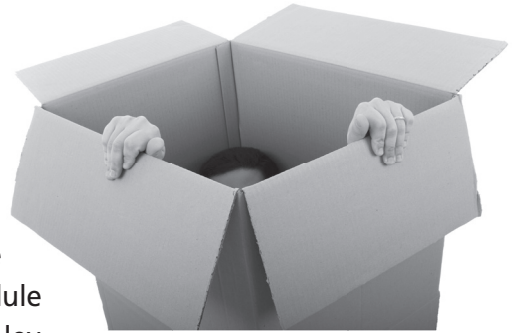
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Scrupulous Anonymous
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Boxed In

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



A few months ago I spoke to a member of the Scrupulous Anonymous family about the schedule for a retreat to be held in May. As we spoke, my level of anxiety rose. This perplexed me. Why was talking about the retreat schedule making me anxious? I've conducted many SA retreats and was confident about the material. I know the retreat weekend is helpful, because I've gotten much positive feedback from participants.

Yet, even though I was confident about the retreat experience itself, the anxiety continued. Only after a bit more discussion did it dawn on me why my anxiety was increasing: The person I was speaking with was trying to manipulate me into designing a retreat weekend that perfectly fit their* particular disease. However, the goal of any SA retreat is to engage the grace-filled healing power of the Lord. It is most certainly not to reflect the particular and highly personal scrupulosity ritual or disease of any one participant.

My anxiety had been growing in direct proportion to my resistance to their suggestions, but as soon as I realized what was happening, I said the retreat schedule would remain as planned.

The person, disappointed and a bit angry, asked why I wasn't willing to do what they suggested. I said the reason was that the process was very helpful as designed. I invited the person to attend the retreat, but I made it clear that the schedule and process used in the retreat would not change.

After our conversation, I sat in my office and contemplated

the conversation. I marveled at how skillfully the person had tried to manipulate the retreat weekend, but I mourned the demonstration of this tactic and wondered where else they were using the same skills. No wonder no real healing was taking place in their life—all their creative energy was devoted to maintaining the disease.

In a very real sense, the person had built a box for their scrupulosity—a box they had effectively locked themselves into by refusing to consider any other viewpoint.

***To simplify protecting this person's identity, my editor has graciously agreed to let me use plural pronouns even though I'm referring to only one person.**

RECOGNIZING THE BOX

I am confident I wasn't talking to a bad person. I am confident they are highly motivated by the best intentions to live a happy and holy life. I am confident they are absolutely unaware of their box or that it makes healing impossible.

However, I'm also confident they are boxed into a living situation that is the source of great pain, anxiety, and guilt. In a very real sense, this person's scrupulosity has not only taken any potential for peace and contentment; it also has constructed an almost-impenetrable defense mechanism.

This kind of defense mechanism cannot be penetrated, because people trapped in the grips of scrupulosity reject any suggestion that doesn't neatly fit into the box of definitions and behaviors they've painstakingly constructed over the years. Each ritual, each examination of conscience, each confession is a building block of spiritual growth and development—but these blocks are anything but helpful. They've become toxic, destructive to the person's spiritual life and perceptions about life.

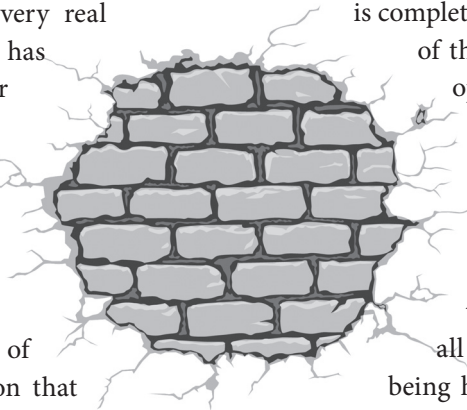
However, despite the toxicity of the box, people with scrupulosity still cling to it, protect it, and continue to build even more defenses. This unhealthy pattern of living is one of suffering and pain, and although they *want* to get rid of the pain, they will not willingly step out of the box. And so it goes—on and on and on.

FINDING AN OPENING

Continuing our phone conversation could lead only to more frustration and disappointment for

this person, so I gently but firmly disengaged from the conversation even though I wanted to push through their defenses and break open the box.

But that wasn't possible. A person acting out a ritual of scrupulosity cannot be interrupted. The ritual has to play itself out—the energy has to be spent. The only hope is that perhaps after the ritual is completed (in this instance, at the end of the conversation), a slight little opening of suggestion may be possible—an invitation that may lead to growth. "It doesn't have to be this way. There is a way out of the box, as difficult as it may be to believe," I assured my caller, all the while wondering if I was being heard and if anything helpful might someday result from my suggestion.



BREAKING THROUGH THE OPENING

Because once in a while, sometimes at the end of a confession or a conversation like this one, a breakthrough happens. The tiniest invitation to begin the healing process is heard, pondered—and even considered. Often it's not the first time the person has reached out for help, and it will most certainly not be the last time. However, each time the invitation is heard and acted on, even with the smallest of steps, one brick in the scrupulosity defense wall cracks.

Of course, it takes many such experiences for the scrupulosity box to be severely weakened so real healing can take place, but that's the power of God's grace.

All journeys—even the most difficult—begin with the simplest and smallest of steps.



INSPIRED BY GRACE

The following is adapted from the revised edition of *Understanding Scrupulosity* by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, C.Ss.R. (Liguori, 2007).

Saint Alphonsus had numerous periods of exhaustion and at least one episode that might be identified as a nervous breakdown. His biographers traditionally attribute this experience to his vow “never to waste a moment of time.” I’m more inclined to attribute it to scrupulosity.

I could list countless examples of his suffering: torturous periods of indecision, sleepless nights, severe stomach ailments, and related physical suffering—complicated, no doubt, by the severe penances he practiced, but which were also possibly the result of scrupulosity. People in his own time and history considered his many penitential practices to be severe, and many times his confessor had to intervene to temper his choices.

It might be comforting for someone with scrupulosity to be aware that a great saint like Alphonsus suffered the same affliction. However, for me what is important is not that he somehow survived his scrupulosity or even that he became a saint, but rather his experience of grace. I look to that for my inspiration.

The miracle of grace Alphonsus experienced as he suffered was that, in the midst of the ravages of scrupulosity, he was able to recognize the love and the forgiveness of God. And not only to recognize God’s gifts and presence but also to respond to God’s call—even in the midst of great suffering that was lifelong and never cured.





SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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Q *I keep remembering sins I'm sure I did not fully confess, so I'd like to make a general confession. How do I arrange this? It will take a while, so shouldn't I make an appointment?*

A The priest directors of our SA family and the authors of the SA newsletter have consistently said that people with scrupulosity should *not* make a general confession. It will not give you the peace you seek. It will further complicate your anxiety and your feelings because at the end of the general confession—within minutes, if not seconds—you will recall one or more sins not fully confessed. You will feel worse than you did when you started. Instead, work on trusting God to forgive your sins, even the imperfectly confessed, rushed, forgotten, or incomplete sins.

God's grace is abundant. The sacramental grace of confession is also generous and abundant. Be at peace.



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