

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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## Why Is the Most Loving Answer

Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

On more than one occasion I've been asked by phone, e-mail, letter, or even face to face to hear the confessions of people with scrupulosity. They start with a compliment, and then make a petition: "Father, you seem to know quite a bit about scrupulosity [*the compliment*], so I'm sure if I could speak to you I'd feel much better [*the petition*]."

I usually thank them for the compliment and decline the petition. Some people understand that I might have a good reason; others quickly assume I'm too busy. Still others believe I'm just rude or unreasonable. But the primary reason is that I'm not the one who can "cure" the person's scrupulosity.

### Who's the expert?

Most people don't realize that I'm not the expert about their condition—they are. As skilled or informed as I may be about scrupulosity, I am capable of offering only limited helpful insight or direction. Sometimes I violate my own rule and agree

to talk to someone with scrupulosity. In each instance, the conversation quickly turns into conflict and disappointment. "I thought you could help me." "You just sit there telling me what to do, and you don't know what you're talking about." And my favorite: "You're just like every other priest."

The last comment is the most accurate. I *am* just like any other priest, spiritual director, counselor, friend, or anyone else trying to help. I can patiently listen, I can recognize the dynamic, and I can have authentic sympathy. But I cannot give what they need most: First, I cannot routinely provide the healing power of the grace of God (resulting in a complete, sudden, and total cure). Second, in a single session I can't give the discipline and dedication to successfully manage scrupulosity.

The first is entirely up to God. The second is entirely up to the person's cooperation with the grace of God. Each person needs to discover the path—the individual practice and discipline—that leads him or her to the most peace.



## Healing versus management

It may sound like I'm disparaging the potentially dramatic healing power of God's grace, but I'm categorically *not*. I have witnessed spontaneous healing in a scrupulous person, so I know grace can be manifested in a powerful and unexpected manner. I also understand and have experienced the healing power of God's grace in my own life. I know and believe that it's only through the grace of God that "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

When I reference the lack of practice and/or discipline necessary to succeed, I'm not talking about a sinful thought, word, or action. I'm not talking about sin at all. I'm talking about the well-known dynamic that's essential for healing: *People in need of healing must accept that need*. This often means they're so worn out, so tired of the condition, that they hit rock bottom. Until then, most people believe they can manage their condition—but healing and management are not the same.

When people ask for help and direction, they're not necessarily seeking healing—sometimes they simply want new ways to manage their condition. If I don't know how their scrupulosity affects them well enough to offer useful management skills, I end up repeating options they've already heard. I have little to nothing useful or life-changing to share, and it's not difficult to imagine the disappointment and frustration they feel.

So when I decline the petition of a person who wants to meet with me, I'm not ignoring that person or demonstrating a lack of concern. On the contrary, I'm recognizing the limits to what can be accomplished even with two people who are sincerely motivated and focused, desiring the same outcome. This is very important to understand and accept.

## Three ways to get help

Throughout the years, the priest editors of the SA newsletter have consistently recommended that people with scrupulosity work with only one confessor. People with scrupulosity need an established relationship with their confessor because that dynamic often reveals a clear path to better management of the condition.

More recently the priest editors have also come to understand that scrupulosity is often rooted in obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), so they have consistently recommended that people with scrupulosity also work with one therapist, counselor, spiritual director, or mentor in addition to the confessor. This approach of having two helpers—priest confessor and therapist/director/mentor—continues to be the most helpful.

With one exception (see next paragraph), when a person engages in more than two helping relationships, the scrupulous person's frustration level is guaranteed to become very high.

The exception to this two-helper rule—the one additional dynamic many people find dramatically healing—is participation in an OCD support group or weekend retreat for people with scrupulosity. For many people, this is their first opportunity to learn from others who suffer in the same way. Recognizing in another's story your own personal suffering and experience can be very healing. Such gatherings also offer tried and true management skills that are often helpful.

Just hearing how other people successfully applied a single skill to their particular manifestation of the scrupulous condition might give you all the encouragement you need.

# The Ongoing Journey

The following is adapted from  
*Deciding to Be Christian: A Daily Commitment*  
by Mark O'Keefe, OSB (Liguori Publications, © 2012).

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The Second Vatican Council taught us that by virtue of our baptism, we are called to be holy. We are called to be saints—*all* of us, not just a special handful of Christians. Sinners are called by God to enter into a friendship, a deep communion, with him. God calls us to draw close to him, to become like him, to share his very divine life. And this is true whatever our state in life.

In a sense, we are already saints. In his letters, Saint Paul frequently addresses his fellow Christians as “the saints” (Ephesians 1:1; Philippians 1:1). We are made holy by our union with Christ in baptism and by our communion with him in the Eucharist. At the same time (and perhaps this is more true to our personal experience), we are always sinners on the road to holiness, the great goal of our lives. We are saints who are invited and challenged to become ever more truly saints.

Early Christian writers noted the distinction between being created in God’s “image” and in God’s “likeness” (Genesis 1:26). We are all created in the image and likeness of God as human beings. To be human is irrevocably to carry the divine *image*. But our *likeness* to God—that is, our resemblance to God—is destroyed or at least marred by the fact of sin. The Christian life, then, is the ongoing journey of conversion in which those created in the image of God strive, with God’s help, to restore their likeness to God. Or to put it another way, we must strive to restore our likeness to an all-holy God.



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# MAILBOX

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**Q** *I was unable to hear the penance from my priest. He's pretty old and hard of hearing, and he shut the window before I could ask him to repeat it, so instead I prayed the penance I received from my last confession. Is that OK?*

**A** You made the correct decision. If you're unsure of your penance, you may substitute a penance from a previous confession. To receive absolution, you must want to be forgiven, sincerely confess your sins, and be willing to perform the penance. Your confession had all of these qualities—you were simply unable to clearly hear what was assigned, and you made the best decision you could.



## ***2012 Scrupulous Anonymous Retreats Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR***

***Friday, Oct. 26 – Sunday, Oct. 28***  
Redemptorist Renewal Center, Tucson, AZ  
For information, call 520-744-3400 or visit  
desertrenewal.org and click on RRC Calendar

**Q** *What is the difference between invalidity and illicitness? I'm trying to determine whether a Mass I attended fulfills my obligation.*

**A** You don't have to understand the difference to know whether your obligation is fulfilled. You may presume, in all good conscience, that when you attend Mass at any Roman Catholic Church in good standing—a parish church, for example—that the Mass is both valid and licit.

To try to make this kind of judgment would be akin to trying to determine how many angels fit on the head of a pin, as Father Louis Miller, CSsR, used to famously reference in the pages of the SA newsletter. In other words, leave the judgment to God and to your local bishop, who is responsible for such decisions.

***Friday, Dec. 7 – Sunday, Dec. 9***  
Perpetual Help Retreat Center, Oconomowoc, WI  
For information, call 262-567-6900

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