

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Scrupulous Anonymous
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STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

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



ONE OF THE MOST DISTURBING characteristics of scrupulosity is a profound feeling of isolation. Time and time again, people share with me their deep feelings of loneliness—loneliness so intense it borders on a feeling of abandonment by family, community, and even Church.

Studies within the last ten years suggest that about 100,000 people in the United States have some form of scrupulosity. About 5 percent of people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) have primarily religious obsessions, and as many as 24 percent have some level of religious obsession.

The numbers are even higher in non-Western societies commonly perceived to be very religious. Preliminary research suggests that the number of OCD patients with religious obsessions in Egypt may be as high as 60 percent and in Saudi Arabia as high as 50 percent (CH Miller and DW Hedges, “Scrupulosity Disorder: An Overview and Introductory Analysis,” *Journal of Anxiety Disorders*, 2008:1042-1058).

Knowledge is power

These numbers help us put scrupulosity into a wider context. Scrupulosity affects people of all age groups, genders, and even religious traditions—it’s not a “Catholic disease” per se. We’re learning that

even though scrupulosity hasn’t received the attention other diseases have, the cognitive, behavioral, affective, and social features of scrupulosity have been identified as common symptoms of the

disease. When such features are categorized and understood by medical practitioners, priests, and spiritual directors, we'll have taken a major step in the right direction.

This is wonderful news. The more we know about scrupulosity, the more effectively we can diagnose and treat it. Because of this research, when people share their feelings of isolation and abandonment, I'm able to help them correctly name what they're experiencing as a *feeling* and not as a statement of fact.

There is a kind of community of people with scrupulosity who want to help others with scrupulosity find a way to manage, if not eventually cure, the disease. This is a great grace many of us have been praying for daily. Therefore, as important and helpful as it is to be aware of current research, it's also important to reflect on the mutual support and encouragement that is part and parcel of the *Scrupulous Anonymous* family.

On the basis of the numbers found in the research, we can state that about 10 percent of people with scrupulosity in the United States and Canada receive this newsletter. Add to that the unknown number of people who access the newsletter at www.liguori.org or read a friend or family member's copy, and you have a great community of mutual support and encouragement.

We, the members of the SA community, are most certainly not alone. There is safety and

strength in numbers, and we stand with our brothers and sisters in mutual support, encouragement, and prayer.

Keep it current

One final note: The research in this issue of SA is current. It reflects the great progress that has been made in understanding the power of OCD and, by extension, the manifestation of OCD called scrupulosity.

This is important to remember because material written about scrupulosity ten years ago doesn't reflect—it *cannot* reflect—all the benefits and insight current research gives us. Outdated material about scrupulosity can often be more harmful than helpful.

Therefore, it's worth your effort and vigilance to pay close attention to the *date of publication* of any material you reference as a help or spiritual guide. If the book is outdated, don't use it. Find more current material. This is much better than risking confusion and/or anxiety in the process of trying to do the right thing.

If you have any doubt about the appropriateness of what you're reading, ask your spiritual director or confessor for help and direction. This would be a very appropriate question for you to ask, and I'm sure he or she will be more than happy to help and guide you.



One measure of maturity is the self-awareness required to observe when we're not living healthily and the discipline to make changes to destructive behaviors. The third commandment asks us to question how authentically we embrace the relationship God initiated with us. We are co-creators with God, and a healthy balance between shouldering the effort of work and accepting the restorative support found in beauty, community, and worship is essential. For after all, life is a marathon, not a sprint.

From *Living the Ten Commandments As a Catholic Today*, compiled and edited by Mathew J. Kessler, © 2009, Liguori Publications.

BETTER TOGETHER

The following is adapted from *Toward God: The Ancient Wisdom of Western Prayer* by Michael Casey, © 1996 Liguori Publications.

Anyone who knows my personal history well and has some understanding of my character will often be very helpful in translating my spiritual experiences and aspirations into a style of life suitable for me—not merely imitative of the way others seem to live.

One person's meat is another's poison. A course of action that attracts me may not necessarily be helpful to my growth in the way I hope. Those who are naturally quiet and withdrawn often reinforce their natural tendency instead of supplementing it. They seek more silence and solitude, when what they need may be more social interaction. Extroverts may seek to be more communicative and more involved with others when what they really need is more deepening within themselves.

We needn't feel inferior because of what we are, but we need to do more than refine qualities in ourselves that come naturally. We need challenge too. Here a soul-friend can help.

At some times of decision-making I need help to perceive issues clearly, avoid blind spots, and mobilize my spiritual resources. No one else should make the difficult decision for me, but one who serenely reflects to me my inner identity can make the choice clearer. There are other benefits as well: support, encouragement, continuity, information—and occasionally a well-administered rude awakening. In brief, a soul-friend may help us discern the meaning of what we have experienced and where we are being called.



PRAYER

Good and gracious God, we praise and thank you for the countless men and women who are part of the SA community. We thank you for their lives of faith and love. We thank you for their struggle, their anxiety, and even their fear, for we know that through the power of your abundant grace, even these feelings and emotions can be used by you to build up your kingdom among us. Provide a steady, calm, and peaceful hand to those dedicated to relieving the sufferings of your people so that they may not lose heart and that they may return to you even greater glory and praise. Amen.





SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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Q *During Mass, I used the restroom. There was no soap. I cleaned my hands as thoroughly as I could under the hot water, but since I hadn't used soap, I didn't participate in the Sign of Peace or go to Communion. Did I make the correct decision?*

A I think you went far beyond what was required. This kind of decision isn't necessarily right or wrong—it's the decision you were most comfortable making within the parameters of what you thought was both prudent and acceptable. Another person in the same situation may have decided he had done the best he could under the circumstances and therefore would have participated in both the Sign of Peace and Communion. Either way, it's not a question of sinfulness, but more properly one of etiquette and hygiene.

Q *I'm 81 years old and find myself thinking about sins of my youth. Recently in confession I felt too ashamed to blurt them out, so I sugarcoated them by mentioning them in a generalized manner. Was I forgiven?*

A Of course you were forgiven—even if you sugarcoated your sins. It's the priest's responsibility to ask any question necessary to clarify his understanding of what the penitent is confessing.

You should *always* assume the confessor understood. The priest has celebrated the sacrament of reconciliation with many people. Even if he's newly ordained, he's been well prepared. Unless by "sugarcoating" you're really saying you "deliberately obscured the matter and the graveness" of what you were confessing (and I don't believe that's what you were doing), you should be in good conscience in this matter.



Attention Readers!

Fr. Westly and Fr. Santa are no longer able to respond to individual letters, and the 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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