

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

PUBLISHED EACH MONTH BY THE REDEMPТОRISTS

September 2009
Vol. 46, No. 9



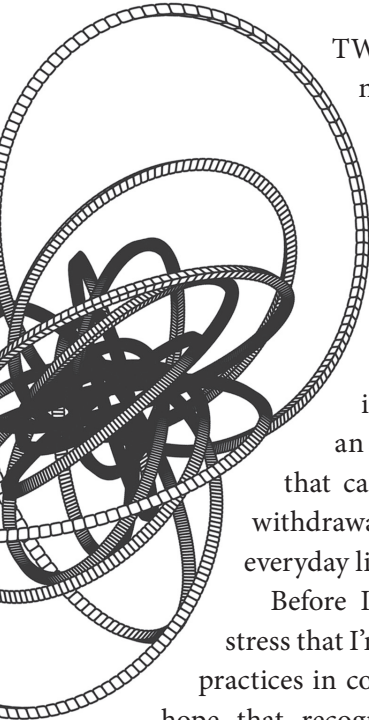
Scrupulous Anonymous
One Liguori Drive
Liguori, MO 63057-9999

Unraveling Scrupulosity

PART TWO

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

This is the second installment in a three-part series on the cognitive, behavioral, social, and affective symptoms of scrupulosity.



TWO OF THE MOST significant behaviors associated with scrupulosity are compulsively going to confession and compulsively repeating prayers, liturgical gestures, or other activities. These behaviors are accompanied by an almost-constant anxiety that can lead to isolation and withdrawal from the activities of everyday life.

Before I go further, I want to stress that I'm not pointing out these practices in condemnation, but in the hope that recognizing these behaviors will help us appreciate the seriousness of scrupulosity.

1. Compulsive confession

I'm deliberately not referring to confession here as a "celebration" of the sacrament of reconciliation because the compulsive confession of perceived sinfulness isn't very celebratory. Scrupulous people snared in the web of compulsive confession exhibit little joy or sense of relief or satisfaction as they confess. Both the examination of conscience and the confession are burdensome and emotionally and spiritually draining.

Four of the most common elements of this practice are recognizable by both penitent and confessor:

- Confessing to multiple confessors in an attempt to feel relief and "get it correct."
- Naming the perceived sin, explaining in detail each component that may or may not be understood as the essential "matter" of the confession.
- Questioning the confessor immediately

after the act of contrition: “Did I mention this?” or “I’m not sure if I explained everything clearly.”

- Frantically interrupting the confessor with more details and questions during the prayer of absolution.

Although the act of confessing sin achieves the intended *spiritual* result—the sin is always forgiven—sometimes the confession doesn’t provide the intended *psychological* result: relief or a sense of completion. Many scrupulous people are almost completely unresponsive to authoritative assurances from the confessor, for example, “No, that isn’t a mortal sin. There’s nothing to be accountable for in this normal behavior.” The compulsive confession of sins, even to the agent of the forgiveness and mercy of God, may give temporary relief, but it doesn’t give long-term benefit.

Mental-health professionals often ask why, if confessing sin not only doesn’t produce a helpful result, but sometimes is actually *unhelpful*, do people keep doing it? This is a great example of how theology and psychology sometimes crash head-on. It also explains why scrupulous people often distrust mental-health professionals: “They’re trying to make me lose my faith!”

But traditional pastoral approaches—for example, the often-repeated counsel to seek one confessor and only one confessor—are well-

intentioned, but lacking. Perhaps if we can see the whole picture, and not just one of the components, we will discover a pastoral approach that will help both penitent and confessor.

2. Compulsive repetition

Some people with scrupulosity feel they must compulsively repeat a specific prayer, a series of pietistic or liturgical gestures (multiple signs of the cross), or an activity pattern (always entering the church from the side door). They believe that engaging in the behavior will prevent a catastrophe or tragedy.

These behaviors reflect a feeling of hopelessness and despair, a sense of drifting away from God deeper and deeper into the pit of sin. People who are overwhelmed by these feelings are often at risk of harming themselves.

3. Anxiety and isolation

Feelings of anxiety, always seemingly present in people with scrupulosity, may best be understood primarily as a force: “I feel very overwhelmed today.” On a good day, a person with scrupulosity might say, “I feel OK, just a little anxious and concerned.” But seldom, if ever, is the anxiety not active and discernible.

People with debilitating anxiety find it almost impossible to enjoy the ordinary experiences of normal life. When people feel apathetic and cannot motivate themselves or engage in even the



most ordinary tasks, one of the social ramifications of scrupulosity results: *isolation*, the tendency to withdraw physically, psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually from family, friends, and even spouses or significant other people.

To prevent or break out of social isolation, people must share their deepest feelings and experiences with another person. If in the sharing they feel they're misunderstood, perceived as too

difficult or too sick, or as if they're frightening the other person, they begin to believe they can't be understood or helped. Feelings of hopelessness and sometimes even despair take root, further enhancing the feeling of isolation. The reality experienced takes on a life of its own, as the old saying goes.

Next Month: Beginning to understand the suspected causes of scrupulosity.

Trust in Providence

The following excerpt is adapted from *Fully Human, Fully Divine: An Interactive Christology* by Michael Casey (Liguori Publications, 2004).

Trust in Providence is not the result of a buoyant personality and an optimistic attitude toward life. Such confidence derives from the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity and quickly wilts unless it is constantly doused with prayer. It was in his moments of deep, solitary communion with his Father that Jesus deepened his bonds with the spiritual world (see Mk 1:35, 6:46, 14:32, perhaps also 3:13 and 9:2). By retreating from the tumult of involvement and going up to the top of a "mountain," Jesus was able to maintain a vision of human life



that was not confined to this-worldly perspectives.

The same experience will be ours. The more we pray, the easier it will be for us to view events and issues in perspective and in proportion. If we abandon prayer, we will tend to leave God out of the equation and, when troubles come, we will find it impossible

to view them otherwise than negatively. We could rephrase Augustine's exhortation thus. When the going is good, build a relationship with God; it will stand you in good stead when things inevitably go wrong.

The more we pray, the easier it will be for us to view events and issues in perspective and in proportion.



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

One Liguori Drive • Liguori, MO 63057-9999

Q Every year I get myself all worked up over holiday shopping for family and friends. I spend too much money, and I'm very disappointed with myself when my credit card bill comes due. Any advice, "Father Santa"?

A People with one type of compulsive behavior—in this case, scrupulosity—sometimes have other compulsive behaviors. Compulsive shopping and spending can be a big problem.

When is enough enough? The answer is in your question: If you dread receiving your credit card bills, you spent too much.

To avoid feelings of failure and anxiety at the end of the holiday season, plan your purchases before you start shopping. I'm not sure whether the other Santa would agree with this advice—his job seems to be to encourage shopping and overall consumption—but I'm pretty sure *this* Santa thinks it's good advice.

Q Must I send donations to religious organizations that send me cards and religious material I didn't ask for?

A You have no obligation to send a donation to any organization that sends you materials you didn't order even if you decide to use the material instead of throwing it away. Organizations that send premiums to potential donors understand that only a small percentage of people will respond with a donation. This percentage of return has been factored into the price the organization pays to mail you the items and is considered to be an acceptable risk.

If you don't want to send a donation, don't send it. If, on the other hand, the donation is within your means and something you'd like to do, then send the donation. But be prepared for more mailings: Once you respond with one donation, you'll be asked for more.



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**.

Please help us continue Scrupulous Anonymous and other Liguori Publications ministries by making a tax-deductible donation or remembering us in your will. Our legal title is Redemptorist Fathers dba Liguori Publications, Federal ID 43-0653409. To make a donation, please use the enclosed envelope or mail to Liguori Publications, One Liguori Drive, Liguori, MO 63057.