

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

PUBLISHED EACH MONTH BY THE REDEMPТОRISTS

OCTOBER 2013

Vol. 50, No. 10



Scrupulous Anonymous
One Liguori Drive
Liguori, MO 63057-9999
www.liguori.org

PART 4 OF 5

Ten Commandments for the Scrupulous (2013)

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

In our September issue, we examined commandments five and six: “You shall not worry about powerful and vivid thoughts, desires, and imaginings involving sex and religion unless you deliberately generate them for the purpose of offending God” and “You shall not worry about powerful and intense feelings, including sexual feelings or feelings expressed during emotional outbursts, unless you deliberately generate them for the purpose of offending God.” These commandments relate to the fear of losing control, although they are often mislabeled as some other form of sin.

In this issue, we focus on the root concern of doubt. We address the issues of resisting your confessor and his directives and confusion about obligations. When you incorporate these essential commandments into your personal spiritual practice, you will feel a deepening sense of calm and peace instead of fear and anxiety.



You shall obey your confessor when he tells you never to repeat a general confession of sins already confessed to him or another confessor.

This commandment encompasses three issues: repeating general confession of sins to your confessor, repeating general confession of sins to other confessors, and following the spiritual counsel of your confessor in all matters of conscience.

A key component of scrupulosity is the seemingly never-ending impulse to repeat certain behaviors based on the misconceived notion that if a single act—in this case, a general confession—is performed perfectly, all doubt will be settled once and for all.

If it were that easy to heal scrupulosity, we would encourage everyone to seek this kind of perfection and engage in this practice. But even if perfection were attainable, this practice still wouldn't be satisfactory, and it wouldn't free people with scrupulosity from fear and anxiety.

Repetition is not the solution. It's a harmful manifestation of the obsessiveness and compulsiveness

that accompany scrupulosity. Obsessive and compulsive repetition of a single action is unhealthy and counterproductive. Repetition is the disorder itself cleverly masquerading as an antidote to doubt, fear, and anxiety. It's the scrupulous conscience in action.

Confessors forbid repetition of confessions not to deprive penitents of sacramental grace, but because confessors understand that repetition is harmful and counterproductive.

The entire scenario is made more complicated by the second component of this commandment: when penitents try to get around the rule by seeing additional confessors. It's at least less than honest to seek out another confessor to engage in the repetitive behavior. It might even be a form of deceitful enterprise.

Repeating confessions, whether to the same confessor or a variety, is harmful and not conducive either to spiritual growth or the healthy management of scrupulosity. Repetition isn't an act of piety or devotion; it's an act of desperation that leaves both the confessor and the penitent unsatisfied and unfulfilled. The general confession isn't a sacramental remedy; it simply fuels the obsession and compulsion. The doubt returns with even more energy and potential for continued injury.

Related to repetition of confession is the impulse to repeatedly examine your conscience—to mine your conscience for sin. For people with scrupulosity, the examination of conscience is counterproductive. Engaging in either the examen or the general confession isn't recommended and shouldn't be part of your spiritual practice.

Leave all sins you've confessed in a sacramental confession in the hands of the Lord. Trust in his loving mercy and forgiveness.

A third component of this commandment is the directive to follow the spiritual counsel of your confes-

or in all matters of conscience. If you've established a relationship of confidence and trust with your confessor, remember that he has your best needs in mind at all times. He's helping you manage your scrupulous conscience. He's leading and guiding you with a patient and understanding heart. He's one of the avenues of God's good grace that's been given to you.

The consistent directive of the great saints throughout the ages and of all of the priest directors of SA over the years has been to follow God's spiritual counsel in all things. When you choose a path that isn't supported by his strong and guiding hand, you take a step backward in your own spiritual growth and development.

It's most certainly not a sin to choose not to follow his directives, but it's counterproductive and not at all helpful.



When you doubt your obligation to do or not do something, you will see your doubt as proof that there is no obligation.

This commandment is based on the moral principle that doubtful laws and obligations do not bind the scrupulous conscience. The great saint and our patron, St. Alphonsus Liguori, taught that this moral principle is the “habitual will of the scrupulous person not to offend God.” St. Alphonsus was intimately familiar with the struggles of the scrupulous conscience. He understood that scrupulous men and women want above all else to please God. In the language of his century, this was called “habitual desire.”

For example, if a person doubts whether a particular holy day is a holy day of obligation within their home diocese—the person does not know for certain

whether it is or is not a day of obligation—that person should understand that no obligation exists.

The reasoning behind this is that if the person knew without a doubt that it was a holy day of obligation, the question of attending or not attending Mass wouldn't even come up, because people with scrupulosity habitually seek to obey all the laws of the Church without question. (An example of this is Ascension Thursday, which in some dioceses is celebrated on that Thursday and in other dioceses is transferred to the next Sunday.)

The priest directors of SA over the years have been very reassured when they read the words of St. Alphonsus. As saint, Doctor of the Church, bishop, and moral theologian, he was (is) uniquely qualified to teach authoritatively on the formation of a moral conscience.

It's good to know that this very wise saint's teaching is so clear and straightforward. "There is no sin" are words we find most reassuring and words most scrupulous people are relieved to hear as often as necessary.

Next month: The last two commandments



2014 Scrupulous Anonymous Retreats
Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

Friday, Jan. 24 – Sunday, Jan. 26

Spiritual Life Center, Wichita, KS

For information, call 316-744-0167 or

visit slc.retreatportal.net/calendar/events.aspx

Friday, May 9 – Sunday, May 11

Redemptorist Renewal Center, Tucson, AZ

For information, call 520-744-3400

Friday, Dec. 12 – Sunday, Dec. 14

Perpetual Help Retreat Center, Oconomowoc, WI

For information, call 262-567-6900



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS

MAILBOX

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Q *At the consecration, our new priest raises the chalice and the host with only one hand instead of two. Not only is this casual and irreverent, I also fear that it makes the Mass invalid. Do I have an obligation to attend another Mass where the ritual is properly followed?*

A I thought I'd heard everything, but evidently I was mistaken. There is no requirement of liturgical ritual, sacramental reverence, or dogmatic prescription regarding the number of hands the priest must use to elevate either the host or the chalice. It's a matter of preference. There is no question of validity or invalidity in this matter. Be at peace in this matter.

Q *Recently I had to excuse myself from Mass to use the restroom. Normally I wouldn't excuse myself from Mass for this purpose, but this time I had no choice. As a result, I missed part of the Mass and didn't fulfill my obligation. It was the last Mass of the day. I live in a small town, and there was no other Mass available for miles. For future reference, what is my obligation in this matter?*

A You fulfilled both your obligation and also the call of nature. The two are not mutually exclusive. You have no obligation to seek out another Mass in this circumstance by any stretch of the imagination. There is no sin involved in this matter. Be at peace.



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See page 3 for more information

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