



A Favorite Fantasy

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

Through **scrupulosity retreats** and my weekly call-in radio show on Radio Maria USA (see page 3), I talk directly to people with scrupulosity and hear their stories and concerns. After many conversations, I've reached two conclusions.

First, we're challenged most in areas in which we feel confident and strong. Scrupulosity often afflicts people who are naturally sensitive and caring, who believe in their relationship with God, and who want to be faithful in that relationship. Some of the kindest, most gentle people I've ever met have scrupulosity.

My second conclusion is that people with scrupulosity have a persistent fantasy that people who don't have scrupulosity never experience powerful and unwanted thoughts and feelings. They move through life in complete control of their thoughts, feelings, and emotions and never have an unexpected moment.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

All people, including the great saints of the Church, regularly have unwanted and unwarranted thoughts and emotions. Such thoughts and emotions are part of who we are as human beings; it's how

we're built. I like to see these distractions as constant reminders from our Creator that we're not as strong and in control as we think, that we're quite fragile and dependent in ways we might not imagine.

An **essential difference** exists between people with and without scrupulosity in regard to unwanted thoughts and emotions. People who don't have scrupulosity interpret unwanted thoughts and emotions as momentary disruptions, and they seldom give such distractions another thought.

People with scrupulosity routinely interpret these thoughts and emotions as personal choices and actions, and they assume full responsibility for each disturbance. They then embrace the presumed consequences of what they see as a choice that's potentially sinful and harmful to their relationship with God.

Same distraction, same element of control and/or lack of control, yet two entirely different interpretations.

Unwanted thoughts and emotions trigger anxiety in people with scrupulosity. Because scrupulosity is an anxiety disorder, the anxious response—perhaps

even more than the thought, word, or action that triggered the anxiety—is what the scrupulous person dreads most and wants to avoid, subdue, or get rid of.

This is totally understandable. No one enjoys anxiety. *But the anxiety itself proves that the thought or emotion we experienced was not freely accepted or generated.* When the thought or emotion is accompanied by the anxiety and an obsessive-compulsive ritual designed to minimize or control the anxiety, from a moral standpoint *no sin is possible, because freedom is substantially diminished.*

It's the anxiety that differentiates a person who has scrupulosity from a person who doesn't have it. For most people, distractions—no matter how powerful or vivid—carry no additional anxiety or distress. They're understood as normal human reactions, and no responsibility is imagined.

Here's something else to think about: If we do freely generate thoughts, words, or actions that produce grievous or serious emotions, we don't do it to produce anxiety. We do it to produce pleasure. There being a substantial difference between anxiety and pleasure, it's quite a stretch to proclaim that anxiety is pleasurable for anyone, in particular for a person with scrupulosity.

Some of you will say that your original intention and/or experience with the thought, word, or action *was* pleasure, and that it quickly deteriorated into anxiety only when you decided you were committing a sin.

This ability to twist an experience into a form that neatly fits into the sin bag, even when it doesn't belong there, is another symptom of scrupulosity.

When this happens, a good practice is to explain your OCD-twisted train of thought to a person who doesn't have scrupulosity to see whether he or she agrees with your interpretation.

You can always pull out your trump card by declaring that the person disagrees with you because he or she isn't Catholic, is too liberal, or completely misunderstands what you're saying, or that you aren't explaining clearly.

That entire process is scrupulosity—diminished capacity—at work. *It is not sin.*

Two lessons might be learned from this. First, all people have unwanted thoughts and emotions. It's part of being human, and it's a sign of life, not sin.

Second, when an unwanted thought or emotion produces anxiety within you, remember that the anxiety itself is a sign that you did *not* freely choose the thought, word, or action. The anxiety proves that you have scrupulosity.

People with scrupulosity have diminished capacity to freely choose, and where there is diminished freedom, there is no sin.

There may be strong anxiety, strong doubt, and many questions, but *there is no sin.*

ScrupulousAnonymous.org



Reflection

Adapted from *Grateful Meditations for Every Day in Ordinary Time, Weeks 19–34*, by Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney (Liguori Publications, © 2013).

We are our own worst enemy. We resist facing certain attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that prevent us from living a good, healthy life. We fight constantly with ourselves because it's too hard to start over. We'd rather remain imprisoned by fear, indifference, shame, selfishness, anger, jealousy, guilt, hatred, and prejudice. We fade into the crowded marketplaces, hoping our sadness and unhappiness will go unnoticed.

We can begin to experience change by being honest with ourselves and facing the things that have caused pain in our lives and in the lives of others. We can move in a positive life direction and ascend to new levels of self-awareness by inviting caring people to walk with us and guide us with their wisdom. We can learn to replace the bitter taste of selfishness with the sweet taste of compassion for others.

The gospel tells us that change is possible. When we prayerfully read the gospels, Jesus stands before us, welcomes us, and invites us to face our shortcomings. By allowing our hearts to be touched by God's healing love, we can experience a change of heart. We're made whole and can live with renewed faith, hope, and love.

Ponder: What changes should I make in my life?

Prayer: Lord, I'm grateful that you love and welcome me. You came to love and save the lost. Help me turn to you when I am confused and lost.

Practice: With a grateful heart, I'll begin to make changes in my life.

Be sure to listen to Fr. Santa's live call-in show, "Understanding Scrupulosity," on Radio Maria USA. The show airs Wednesdays at 2 pm Eastern Time.

To listen: Go to radiomaria.us/scrupulosity to access podcasts or listen live

To call in: 866-333-MARY (6279)

To e-mail a question to Fr. Santa: Go to radiomaria.us/scrupulosity and complete the form.



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS

MAILBOX

ONE LIGUORI DRIVE • LIGUORI, MO 63057-9999
NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

Q *I work in a medical clinic. When I bill patients for a procedure the Church considers immoral, am I committing a sin?*

A If the medical facility offers general medical care, it isn't a sin (mortal or venial) for you to bill patients for procedures the Church doesn't approve of. If, on the other hand, the facility specializes in medical procedures and practices that the Church teaches are immoral, your participation is enabling such practices. This changes the equation completely. In that case, there is a very strong possibility of the sin of commission of an immoral act.

Q *Is it a sin for Catholics to pay to use resources affiliated with the Mormon church to study genealogy?*

A No. Doing so does not indicate your support or your encouragement of the Mormon (Latter-Day Saints) church. You're purchases are for studying your ancestors' history, nothing more. The Mormon church has an intense interest in genealogy, and they share their resources with the public. You're simply using or not using this service, depending on your personal interest.

**2014 Scrupulous Anonymous Retreat
Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR**

Friday, Dec. 12 – Sunday, Dec. 14 Perpetual Help Retreat Center, Oconomowoc, WI
For information, call 262-567-6900 or visit RedemptoristRetreat.org and click on "Calendar"

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.

© 2014 Liguori Publications. All rights reserved. **Policy on Copying or Distributing:** *Individuals* may download, print, copy, and/or share issues of *Scrupulous Anonymous* provided 1) you don't remove this copying/distributing policy and 2) you don't seek or accept payment for the copies. **Nonprofit organizations** may quote SA in publications offered at no cost as long as you identify *Scrupulous Anonymous* as the source and include the issue number or date and the publisher (Liguori Publications, ScrupulousAnonymous.org). **For commercial or other purposes**, no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior written permission of Liguori Publications. Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists (redemptorists.com). Scripture texts in this work are taken from the *New American Bible*, revised edition © 2010, 1991, 1986, 1970 Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., Washington, DC. All Rights Reserved.