

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

JANUARY 2016

Vol. 53, No. 1



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

PUBLISHED EACH MONTH BY THE REDEMPTORISTS

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A Spirituality of Illusion?

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa

In Pope Francis' homily at the closing Mass of the October 2015 Synod of Bishops, he said, "This is the temptation: a 'spirituality of illusion': we can walk through the deserts of humanity without seeing what is really there; instead, we see what we want to see."

As I read these words, I thought of the many times in my own life that I've acted and reacted exactly as our Holy Father described—even when the questions I'm wrestling with aren't big and difficult ones. Sometimes I can't see and experience the truth, the wonder, the mystery and the awe of the universe. I walk through deserts of my own making. Despite my best efforts, I'm snatched up in the distraction of the moment.

I also thought about each of you, the good men and women who struggle with scrupulosity. The illusion of sin caused by scrupulosity is an example of what the Holy Father calls "spirituality of illusion."

Scrupulosity afflicts people with a constant experience of spiritual blindness, the inability to see "what is really there." People with scrupulosity "see" serious sin and constant failure and feel intense anxiety. They find themselves walking through a desert of hopelessness and abandonment instead of an oasis of love, peace, and grace.

But no matter how intense and convincing the anxiety, the serious sin and failure aren't real; they're an illusion caused by a cruel disease that

robs people of their ability to celebrate, rejoice, and be grateful. People with scrupulosity incorrectly believe that this fear and anxiety are normal, the way God intended.

Pope Francis was speaking to everyone when he used the word *illusion* in his homily; everyone is unable to see clearly sometimes. However, people with scrupulosity experience the problem far more often.

The human brain is wired to judge what it perceives, and in its efforts to do so sometimes fills in something missing that “should” be there or deletes something that “should not” be there. Researchers Daniel Simons and Christopher Chabris illustrated this point in their 1999 study on selective attention. Study participants were asked to watch a 2-minute video of six young people passing basketballs around and to count the number of times one of the basketballs is passed. Halfway through the video, a man dressed as a gorilla walks into the group, beats his chest, and leaves.

After the video, participants were asked whether they’d seen the gorilla. Half had been so focused on their counting task that they hadn’t even noticed him

even though he’s pretty hard to miss (see for yourself at TheInvisibleGorilla.com.)

The results of this study show how incomplete—or completely wrong—perceptions can be. Even though we know it’s normal to be confused or uncertain, we can find it hard to accept that explanation when it comes to perceived sinfulness. We let our intense feelings of guilt and anxiety override our understanding that we might not be seeing things clearly: “Since I feel so bad, I must be responsible in at least a small way.” The feelings are real, but the perceived mortal sin that triggered those feelings is not real. The sin is an illusion generated by the disease of scrupulosity.

A winning strategy for people with scrupulosity is not to battle the thoughts and the distractions, but to experience them in a manner that doesn’t paralyze. The ability to do this is a grace attainable through spiritual practice and discipline.

Your spiritual director, confessor, and/or counselor can suggest specific disciplines and practices appropriate for you.

God will provide the grace and strength.

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Reflection

Adapted from *Joyful Meditations for Every Day of Advent and the 12 Days of Christmas* by Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney (Liguori Publications, © 2010).

We think we know others. We think we know what makes them tick, what they like and dislike, what will make them happy, sad, or angry. Sometimes we make judgments based on what we know. We judge them as stupid, quick-tempered, oversensitive, or fussy. These labels give us the illusion that we are able to control others through our judgment of them.

Our need to control others is an expression of fear. We're afraid of the unknown and unexplored spiritual power of ourselves and others. We're afraid of the power of love.

Ponder: When have I experienced the mystery of another? When have I touched my own mystery?

Pray: Lord, your love helps me to embrace the unknown. Reveal yourself to me so that I may recognize you in myself and others.

Practice: Today I will be careful not to judge anyone.

God's example of unconditional love teaches us that all people must be free to be fully themselves, with all their human strengths and weaknesses. Love is a willingness to step into the unknown without preconceived notions. Love is diving into the mystery of each person and enjoying what we find without trying to change or distort it.

Accepting that each of us is created in the image of God's love and goodness is all we need to recognize that God is among us.



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MAILBOX

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NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

Q *I find myself very concerned and easily upset when I observe Catholic men and women whom I know are in a state of mortal sin receiving holy Communion. What is my obligation in this situation?*

A To quote Pope Francis, “Who am I to judge?” How do you know the condition of the person’s conscience? The consistent advice of SA director priests over the years is to choose not to act or to interfere. This is not a sin of omission. It’s good pastoral advice you should put into practice.

Q *The cashier at a drive-thru window gave me too much change. We were 100 miles away before I realized it. Must I go all the way back to rectify it?*

A You needn’t return to the restaurant, and there is no need to make restitution. You did nothing to enable the mistake, and the benefit you received is minimal. If it will make you feel better, put the same amount in the poor box the next time you’re in church. You’re not required to do this, but I’m sure it will be appreciated.

Scrupulous Anonymous Retreat
Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR
Friday, Jan. 15 – Sunday, Jan. 17, 2016
Spiritual Life Center (Wichita, KS)
7100 East 45th Street North
Bel Aire, KS 67226
316-744-0167
www.bit.ly/SARetreat-Wichita

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