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The Ultimate Answer

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

One manifestation of scrupulosity is an endless barrage of questions fueled by obsessive or compulsive thoughts. But instead of bringing peace and relief, the answers to those questions bring more questions, and eventually the search is temporarily abandoned due to overwhelming frustration and exhaustion. After a brief and uncomfortable respite, the frantic search is renewed, and the cycle begins again.

This ritual isn't simply questioning for the sake of questioning. It's a desperate struggle to find personal reassurance and conviction. People with scrupulosity—the religious manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)—ask these questions within a highly charged religious context and understanding: “Despite how I feel, am I truly loved, and am I safe from eternal condemnation? My rational self tells me yes, but my emotions scream no.”

The fear of condemnation fuels the anxiety and provides the emotion that drives both the obsession and/or compulsion. Because of their fear of sin, many people with scrupulosity can't seek helpful behavior modification, because to engage the behavior is to “give permission” for the sin.

What many people with scrupulosity don't understand—not because of error or sin on their part—is that all people feel incomplete, unloved, and imperfect. People without scrupulosity also have doubts and feel incomplete, unloved, and alone, but those feelings come and go. People with scrupulosity, on the other hand, have those feelings all the time.

I don't like to use the words *normal* and *abnormal* when I discuss scrupulosity, because I don't want people with scrupulosity to apply the word *abnormal* to their entire life experience. But the scrupulous condition is not the norm. It is abnormal to be *dominated* by feelings and emotions that make us feel incomplete, unloved, and uncared for despite our best efforts.

In moral theology, any condition that distorts a person's reality into something the vast majority of other people don't experience diminishes that person's responsibility. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says that God gives all people free will that makes us responsible for our acts “to the extent that they are voluntary” [emphasis added (1734)]. “Imputability and responsibility

for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors” (1735).

When people aren’t free because of extenuating factors, their actions aren’t voluntary and therefore are not sinful—and neither are their effects. No matter how distasteful the actions, the people committing them are not responsible and therefore have not sinned.

What all this fancy jargon means is quite simple: If you have scrupulosity, you’re not responsible for the questions, thoughts, and feelings you’re convinced are sinful. You have a terrible affliction. You are not generating the actions for which you take responsibility. There is no sin—venial *or* mortal—there is only suffering.

Does this mean you’re not *capable* of exercising your free will, the voluntary freedom that is a gift of God’s grace to each member of the human family?

No, most certainly not. You routinely engage your free will in many areas of your life, making mature and responsible choices and decisions every day. But those free and responsible choices don’t involve the area(s) of concern in your scrupulous condition. It’s those areas of concern in which you experience the effects of “diminished or even nullified” responsibility.

The ultimate answer to the questions you ask every day is this: You are truly loved, and you are not on the path to eternal condemnation. You have a powerful affliction that robs you of peace. Your suffering, pain, and anxiety are not in any way sin, but that doesn’t mean they don’t feel like sin and that your anxiety about sin isn’t real.

Your feelings and anxiety are real. What is not real is your conclusion that the concerns generating the emotions are sinful.

Feelings, real. Sin, not real.

Excerpts from English translation of the [Catechism of the Catholic Church for the United States of America](#) © 1994, United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—*Libreria Editrice Vaticana*; English translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church: Modifications from the Editio Typica* © 1997, United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—*Libreria Editrice Vaticana*.

[ScrupulousAnonymous.org](https://www.ScrupulousAnonymous.org)

Building Family Faith

The following reflection is adapted from “Don’t Panic: When Will My Family Be Perfect?” by Greg and Jennifer Willits, in [Family, the Church, and the Real World](#) (Liguori Publications, © 2015. All rights reserved.).

If you’re certain your family is completely messed up, if you feel like you’re the most miserable sinner around, take comfort in knowing you’re not alone.

Families were first modeled in the image and likeness of the Trinity. We are called by our “perfect” creation to make our families reflect this profound relationship of life and love that exists between the three persons of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In working toward this perfection, our family becomes a domestic church where God is worshiped and adored at the center of our lives.

Here are five easy ways to put it all together in your home.

1. Eat, drink, and be merry together. By learning about one another’s interests and having mealtime conversations that keep everyone engaged, you build love and respect.

2. Safeguard what enters your home. Aside from setting up parental controls and restrictions, regular conversation is key to strengthening your family’s moral compass. Discuss problematic entertainment and web content and lovingly explain what is and is not allowed in your house.

3. Serve at home and beyond. Regular chores help children become more responsible and let them know they are vital components in making the home run efficiently.

4. Model healthy relationships to your children. Love is modeled through images of God’s love for us, through loving and patient relationships with our children, and through physical expressions of love between spouses. Let your kids see you holding hands, hugging, and sneaking a few kisses. Plan regular date nights to stay connected to the love that existed before the children came.

5. Pray as a family. Stay focused on the truth that as a family unit we are struggling to stay in a committed relationship with God every day. Pray together as often as you can. When some members of the family can’t join you, pray with anyone who is available.

Liguori Publications’ [Family, the Church, and the Real World](#) received two 2016 Catholic Press Association Awards: 1st place, Popular Presentation of the Catholic Faith; and 3rd place, Family Life. For more information, visit [Liguori.org](#).



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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Q *What is the difference between a general confession and a devotional confession?*

A For people with scrupulosity, there is no substantial difference between a general confession and a devotional confession. Avoid both practices. They generate unnecessary anxiety and doubt instead of the spiritual help you envision.

General and devotional confessions are two spiritual practices people with scrupulosity must avoid.

Q *Why won't you give a straight answer about sexuality and sexual practices? I just want to know whether something is a mortal or venial sin. What could be difficult about answering that?*

A Sexuality as a gift from God is a blessing and a source of grace. However, it's also nuanced, and its layers of meaning make it difficult to give one-size-fits-all answers.

Some people are willing to give black-and-white answers to sexuality questions, but the SA newsletter gives pastoral and orthodox answers. Our respect for our readers and for human sexuality means we take the informed and reflective approach to answering questions.

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