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New Year Mail Bag

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

Time and again I hear that the question-and-answer forum is the most popular and helpful feature of the Scrupulous Anonymous ministry. It's been a while since we've had an all-question issue of the newsletter, so I thought it might be a good way to start the new year. I also answer questions on my weekly call-in program on Radio Maria USA (see page 3).

Q *I'm seventy years old. Lately I'm plagued by memories of serious sins—even some from my childhood. I can't remember whether I confessed them or whether I tried to minimize their seriousness in my description to the priest. I'm trying to trust in God and leave the past behind. What should I do?*

A Your uncertainty is caused by the disease of scrupulosity, not by whether you actually have unconfessed or incompletely confessed sins. Your uncertainty shows that your scrupulosity is active and unrelenting.

However, there is grace in your experience. In the midst of your anxiety, you're able to remember God's active healing and forgiveness. You're living in the tension of the pull between grace and scrupulosity, and that's progress. It's exactly where you should be at this moment.

Grace will prevail. God's will for you will be accomplished no matter how strong your anxiety and struggle. You are loved and forgiven—not as you one day might be, but as you are today. Through God's grace, your conviction will strengthen each day as you grow in trust and in the deepening experience of God's love.



Q *Jesus said that whoever believes in him should have eternal life. If it's really that simple, why are people with scrupulosity afraid of hell? And what if you believe but die in a state of mortal sin?*

A You've really hit the nail on the head. Your question captures the power of the promise of life that comes to us from Jesus and coexists with the murkiness of scrupulosity.

Objectively, a person of faith is required to believe that we all have the potential to commit serious and mortal sin. No matter how difficult it might be to imagine, even a person of faith actively trying to live the will of God each day is capable of freely choosing to commit an act of mortal sin. Stranger things have happened.

But mortal sin is not lurking behind every bush and shadow waiting to ensnare the unsuspecting believer in a moment of weakness. Serious sin results from an escalating pattern of decisions and actions that culminates in a choice that becomes mortal.

This process isn't mysterious. With serious reflection, we can easily chart and understand it. Spiritual traditions like the daily examination of conscience can interrupt the escalation before it becomes a mortal choice.

Many people are caught up in the notion of the *penalty* of sin, particularly penalties that were once routinely attached to a thought, word, or action. With the exception of very serious offenses, the Church no longer emphasizes automatic penalty; it now emphasizes how human beings make decisions and regulate their moral choices. You can search high and low through the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and you won't find a reference to the clear penalty of mortal sin and/or venial sin. You will find an entirely holistic approach. It never minimizes sin; rather, it brings it into focus with a clearer understanding.

For people with scrupulosity, the invitation is clear: Devote more energy and care into believing in the fullness of the grace of God and eternal life.

The flip side is also essential: Spend less time in the fanciful and harmful expression of fear and anxiety.



Q *Father, I can no longer trust your advice. In the August 2014 newsletter you incorrectly asserted that drinking black coffee before receiving holy Communion will not break the eucharistic fast. Since you were wrong in this matter, I have lost all confidence in your advice.*

A My answer was not incorrect. Many interpreters of the law agree with me, and others who interpret the law more strictly don't. But that's not the important issue here.

What's important is that you're looking for

certitude that is not attainable. You're vigilant in all things, large and small. I find it hard to believe you'd be careless about this matter in any way, yet your unyielding position ensures that you'll never be free from the ravages of scrupulosity. You're unwilling to live with imperfection, doubt and, in the matter of the eucharistic fast, conflicting opinions and interpretations of the law. You demand simple black-and-white answers that leave no room for complexity and nuance.

This is a trap. Your perspective dooms you to escalating anxiety, fear, and doubt instead of calm and certitude. Grace can't penetrate the barriers you've constructed. God's love will eventually and eternally penetrate them, but God's invitation to a life of grace here and now is something you seem to be resisting.

This response may seem harsh, but it's totally honest. Scrupulosity that demands total and complete certitude in all matters is the only type of scrupulosity that cannot be healed or subdued. If you're unable to even consider nuance—if you see only black and white and no gray—the sunshine of grace can't penetrate.

Fear, anxiety, and guilt feed on the illusion that certitude is attainable. The more demanding you are of certitude, the stronger your fear, anxiety, and guilt.

Grace, on the other hand, invites us to risk, believe, and imagine. It's the ultimate experience of losing your life to gain your life (Matthew 10:39), as Jesus so lovingly invited us to consider and to believe.



Q *On Sunday I moved an artificial plant from my living room to another room. It took only a few minutes, but now I'm afraid I broke the fourth commandment, "Keep holy the Sabbath." Should I confess this as a mortal sin or a venial sin?*

A You shouldn't confess it, because you didn't sin. It's fine to engage in this kind of work on Sunday. I and many other people find cleaning,

redecorating, and other simple household tasks enjoyable and relaxing. The fourth commandment wasn't intended to regulate this kind of activity. The editors of the Old Testament were regulating the kind of work that is well beyond the experience of most people in our developed world. The editors would in fact marvel at what we call servile work.

I mention this only because it helps to illustrate

the necessity of taking the text of the Scriptures in context and not reading something into it that isn't there.

For the commandments to be a source of spiritual animation, we must be willing to engage in the hard work of interpreting and applying the commandments to our time and experience. This is a personal effort, but it's also the effort and the responsibility of our faith community.

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.

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Reflection

Adapted from *Peaceful Meditations for Every Day in Ordinary Time, Weeks 1–9*, by Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney (Liguori Publications, © 2012).

[Jesus said to them] “No one puts new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost, and so are the skins; but one puts new wine into fresh wineskins.”

MARK 2:22

When we repeat the thought and behavior patterns that keep us stressed and unfulfilled, the wineskin of our life is ready to burst.

Jesus challenges us to discard our old habits of anxiety and doubt and face each day with a new attitude of love and hope. We can face the world with confidence in God’s love. We can let go of yesterday’s troubles and worries and focus on doing our best today. We can approach our responsibilities with a fresh outlook, trusting that God will show us what to do and how to do it. We can refuse to project into the future and instead put our energy into enjoying all that today offers us.

Jesus shows us a new way of living with God as our source of love and strength. We can bring our fears about finances, bills, and employment to God and wait for guidance. We can go to God

when we are tired, lonely, or ill and receive comfort and love.

We can sit in solitude with God and rest in the silent healing of God’s grace. When life’s pressures, tasks, and requirements make us feel like we are about to implode, we can remember to discard our old way of meeting life’s demands and take up the new way Jesus teaches us: Surrendering to God’s will of love of God, ourselves, and our neighbors.

Ponder: What old habits do I need to discard?

Prayer: Lord, you are the new wine of life, love, and peace. Bless me with the willingness to pour out love and joy into the lives of my sisters and brothers.

Practice: Today I will try a new approach to a familiar task.