

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Diminished Capacity

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

I always tell people with scrupulosity to check the publication date of a book before they follow its advice. Someone without scrupulosity can read a book from the 1800s and profit from it. But SA members follow directions exactly as they're written, and a directive from the 1800s may be harmful.

In the 1800s, for example, addiction was thought to be a character weakness. Now we know it's a disease with a genetic component. A person who reads an 1800s book about addiction will be seriously misinformed and could suffer severe psychological damage. A person dealing with issues related to mental health and personal well-being should have the most current advice. It would be foolhardy not to do so.

Here's another analogy: If you apply instruction from a Model T Ford driver's manual to a 2013 Chevy Malibu, you'll be forever frustrated. Yes, both are cars; yes, both are used for transportation; yes, they have points of convergence. But the Model T manual will be severely lacking when it's applied to a computer-managed car.

I understand, of course, that in this newsletter we're not talking about driver manuals. We're talk-

ing about the spiritual life. But the same principle applies, even to books written by saints—men and women of the highest credibility. People with scrupulosity have a *diminished capacity* to determine which directives are useful and which are not. They try to overcome their lack of capacity to effectively understand the full consequences of their decisions and actions by toughing it out in the false belief that somehow this is what is required by God to save their souls.

I don't use the words *diminished capacity* lightly. But I'm convinced that the effects of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and the religious manifestation of OCD in scrupulosity contribute



to a diminished capacity to act in a reasonable and healthy manner in specific instances.

For example, a person who doesn't have scrupulosity might find that examining her conscience before going to reconciliation brings useful insights and direction. But a person with scrupulosity would find it to be an excruciating scrutinization of every possible thought, feeling, and emotion remotely associated with the action or concern.

In other words, a person with scrupulosity has a diminished capacity to effectively use the examination of conscience as part of a spiritual routine and therefore shouldn't even engage in the discipline.

Scrupulosity is an illness that causes an inability to effectively control certain impulses, be they thoughts or actions. A person with scrupulosity who tries to do a reasonable examination of conscience is like an alcoholic who tries to drink a reasonable amount of alcohol: For an alcoholic, there is no such thing as a reasonable amount of alcohol. An alcoholic who wants to be sober must avoid alcohol completely. Similarly, a scrupulous person who wants to become healthy and be free from obsessive-compulsive behavior must avoid any activity that engages the harmful impulse. There are no two ways about it.

Most psychologists would agree they can't diagnose a person as having diminished capacity without observing the person over time. This diagnosis can't be made quickly or casually. Only a regular confessor and/or spiritual director can determine whether this diagnosis is accurate.

Once they've been properly diagnosed, people with diminished capacity must understand that certain spiritual practices are out of the question for them because they have the opposite of the intended result. Actively engaging in such practices seriously harms their spiritual life and well-being. In such instances, other avenues of God's grace and even the sacramental life of the Church are more appropriate and effective.

If a person has diminished capacity in the manner I've described, it's because of the effects of religious OCD. It's most certainly *not* the result of sin or lack of will or effort. It's *not* an excuse or an attempt to find the easy way out.

Members of our SA family should seek out their confessor and/or spiritual director for a discussion that will lead them to some sense of peace in the Lord.



Sitting There All Peaceful and Quiet

The following is adapted from *Finding Your Hidden Treasure: The Way of Silent Prayer* by Benignus O'Rourke, OSA (Liguori Publications, © 2010).

Some time ago, an elderly lady complained to me that she could no longer pray. "Father," she said, "I can't pray like I used to. I come here to church after my shopping and sit here all peaceful and quiet. But I can't pray like I used to."

I tried to suggest that perhaps sitting there "all peaceful and quiet" was prayer. Maybe it was a gift God was offering her at this stage of her life. But she was not convinced. Prayer for her meant keeping her mind on the words, battling distractions, concentrating. Sitting there all peaceful and quiet would have seemed to her like laziness and failure.

What my parishioner was discovering, in fact, was one of God's loveliest gifts, the purest form of prayer. She rejected it because it was not what she had been taught. And she is not alone. Many people who come to the retreat house where I live to attend Sunday or daily Mass or to find peace and quiet or guidance share her anxiety about praying.

Many of us remember being taught that prayer is a lifting of our minds and hearts to God. This teaching can lay a heavy burden on us. We feel we must make an effort to speak to

God, to praise him, to give thanks, to ask for help. We normally use words, thoughts, and images and feel we have to keep our minds fixed on what we are saying.

But there are times when we cannot find the words, or when the well-known prayers that usually inspire and comfort us strike no chord in our hearts. Or we may be singing God's praises while our hearts are heavy or empty. And our hearts become heavier because our feelings do not match the words.

We are perhaps tired of words anyway. Tired of asking God in words that have no life in them. Tired of thinking about God. Tired of being talked to about God. Tired of saying prayers that may be beautiful in themselves but are not bringing God closer to us.

Then, perhaps, it is best to simplify our prayers and follow the age-old advice to go from many words to few words, from few words to one word, and from one word into silence. Sometimes when we pray, our words—any words—can be barriers. They come between us and God.

The deepest communion with God comes through silence.





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Q *Father, may I make an appointment with you? If I could talk to you for just a few minutes, I'd feel so much better.*

A I'm humbled by your request and honored that you'd think of me—but I'm sorry, the answer has to be no. Your path to wholeness and health doesn't start with me. Your relationships in your local community are much more valuable and useful. For this reason, among others too numerous to list, I respectfully decline.

Even if you find a way to get through to me by phone or appear at my office door, I won't change my mind. I respect you too much to engage in a dialogue that will frustrate both of us and still not lighten your load.

Q *It's soon income tax time. This isn't a good experience for me, my spouse, or our accountant. I'm filled with anxiety that something has been misstated or is incomplete and that I'll be guilty of perjury and serious sin.*

A My best advice is that you participate in the process as little as possible. Fulfill that which is absolutely required of you, but trust your spouse and your accountant. This isn't irresponsible or ignoring your obligations—it's sensible and wise. You're not required to accumulate any more stress in this process.

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