

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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PART 2 OF 3

## Ten Commandments of OCD-Based Scrupulosity

*Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR*



In this second of three installments, I propose three more commandments to help us understand scrupulosity as a specific religious manifestation of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Understanding this daily struggle won't automatically make everything better, but it will give us a starting point for insight and understanding.



### Fourth Commandment

*Resist the urge to engage in ritualistic behaviors.*

Ritualistic behaviors—repeating a word until a distracting thought disappears, checking a locked door five consecutive times, or taking one small step at a time in the Communion line—may mask fear, but they don't remove its cause. They may produce a false sense of confidence or control, but in reality ritualistic behavior, although deceptively comforting, throws life out of—not into—balance.

Often when we dedicate all our energy and focus to a ritual, we disengage from the normal rhythms of life and isolate ourselves so we can be free to perform the ritual whenever we think we must.

For example, a person intent on taking very small steps in the Communion line to keep her attention focused on the sacrament can become agitated and irritated when invited by an usher to step into a faster-moving line. If this happens once, it's not a big deal. But if it happens repeatedly the priest, eucharistic minister, and ushers soon learn to direct traffic around the person engaging in the ritual, who soon earns a reputation of being a little off or even crazy. This leads to isolation as everyone tries to avoid confrontation.

Even when they don't understand it, our families and other significant people learn the requirements of ritualistic behavior. For example, people who check the lock on the door five times before getting into the car can make others late. The family learns to avoid confrontation by choosing to

leave much earlier than necessary or by not going at all.

People who ritually repeat words to prevent distractions or offending thoughts become less and less engaged with normal conversation and communication.



## Fifth Commandment

*Do not be afraid of your feelings; feelings are not sinful.*

Human beings are blessed by God with the ability to see, hear, smell, think, and express emotions. We're able to express irritation, anger, pleasure, happiness, and sadness—an entire range of emotions—within a very short period.

We're also capable of having feelings that may be perceived as dramatic or identified as appropriate or inappropriate, depending on the circumstances.

When we yell “Get out of the way!” when someone is about to be knocked over, we may find ourselves breathless, with racing heart and sweaty palms, because of the intensity of the situation. Few people would consider that to be a sin, but we might have the same symptoms when we meet a celebrity or someone we find physically attractive.

When those symptoms are an indication of attraction, do they indicate a level of sinfulness? No. The racing heart, sweaty palms, and shortness of breath indicate excitement, which is a perfectly normal and acceptable feeling—it's a manifestation of how God created us.

When people with scrupulosity mistrust their feelings and have a heightened need to remain controlled, they can develop *alexithymia*. In this extreme condi-

tion, a person is so vigilant about controlling his feelings and expressing himself that he is completely unaware of his true feelings. His dominant awareness is not of the feeling itself, but of the need to avoid, control, or discipline the feeling. People with alexithymia need immediate medical care.



## Sixth Commandment

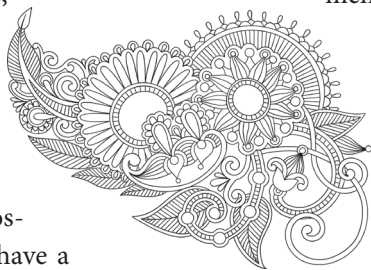
*Do not be afraid of your sexuality.*

Sexuality and sexual feelings are gifts from God. They are not sinful. It is not a sin to routinely have a sexual thought. Sexuality and sexual feelings are very powerful, and at certain times they seem to be ever-present, even dominating. However, that being said, sexual feelings are normal for human beings. God *intends* for us to be attracted to other people in a sexual manner.

As we grow through adolescence into adulthood, each of us learns who he or she is as a sexual person. We slowly learn that sexual expression includes activities that are primarily 1) procreative, 2) relational, and 3) recreational. Healthy sexuality and sexual expression integrate *at least* these three specific functions.

People who become entirely focused on just one aspect of their sexuality are understood by most mental-health professionals and caregivers to be immature and sometimes have the potential for deviant behavior.

All men and women—with or without scrupulosity—are invited by God to grow in maturity every day, including developing, celebrating, and integrating our sexuality.



**Next month:** Commandments seven through ten.

# PEELING THE ONION

The following is adapted from *Praying Throughout The Day: A Book of Hours for Those With Addictions* by Harriet Roberts (Liguori Publications, © 2007).

**A**ddiction is rampant in modern society. How can we use the ancient and proven disciplines of contemplative prayer—a rhythm of prayer, work, study, rest, and other monastic practices—to foster reconnection with God and heal?

In John 5:6, Jesus asks the paralyzed man at the pool at Bethesda, “Do you want to get well?” If you don’t really desire wholeness, any attempt at recovery will be futile.

Why would anyone not want to get well? One man said the cure was worse than the disease. And sometimes we’re comfortable with our demons; they give us seen or unseen protection from whatever is assaulting our spirits and overwhelming us. We think we need those demons and won’t part with them until we’re thoroughly committed to recovery and have replaced the addictive substances or behaviors with an intimate, vibrant, deepened relationship with God.

Change is hard, uncomfortable, and demanding, often showing us things about ourselves we’d rather not see. But those hesitations must be coupled with our innate flexibility and ability to change: It’s never too late. We always have a choice.

Recovery isn’t linear, and some lose patience with addicted people who relapse. But that’s common; success and relapse cohabit until willingness to change takes the upper hand.

Recovery is like peeling an onion. We make assumptions about the interior of the onion, but once we begin peeling the layers it’s obvious that we’ll need to alter our plan of action to maximize the amount of “healthy” onion we can recover. Layers are of different sizes and thickness and are never perfectly aligned. They stick to each other and rip. And they make us cry. So it is with the complex, baffling, intransigent aspects of addiction and recovery.

Addiction isn’t the problem. It’s the symptom of a deeper problem that hasn’t been successfully worked through. Hiding the cookies or pouring the sherry down the drain may bring momentary satisfaction, but it won’t halt the drive hiding behind the symptom. Addiction affects all of our relationships and every aspect of our lives: physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, financial, cognitive, interpersonal. It attacks our self-esteem, our sense of competence, our ability to love. It isn’t “us against them”—we are all “them.” We are all diminished by addiction in one way or another.





# SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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**Q** *I'm too sinful to be Catholic. I've committed so many sins—some horrific—and I can't believe God has forgiven me. I'm resigned to the fact that I'm going to hell.*

**A** At first glance, my answer may seem trite or flippant, but it's actually a reflection of hard reality:

*God has forgiven you.* The issue is that you haven't forgiven yourself.

It's difficult to stand before God in all humility and accept our faults and failings, especially the severe ones. I suggest that as you stand before God, lift your head and look into the face of Jesus. You will see love and forgiveness, not condemnation. God offers us

this great gift of love and forgiveness. All we have to do is accept it.

**Q** *Have you heard of anyone being cured of scrupulosity?*

**A** No, but many people with a tender conscience have learned to form their conscience in a manner that relieves them of inner anguish. I've also encountered many people with OCD whose quality of life significantly improved after they sought and accepted the help of professional care providers. I find both examples very encouraging.



## ***2012 Scrupulous Anonymous Retreats Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR***

***Friday, Oct. 26 – Sunday, Oct. 28***

Redemptorist Renewal Center, Tucson, AZ

For information, call 520-744-3400 or visit

[desertrenewal.org](http://desertrenewal.org) and click on Events Calendar

***Friday, Dec. 7 – Sunday, Dec. 9***

Perpetual Help Retreat Center, Oconomowoc, WI

For information, call 262-567-6900

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