

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Why Don't Priests Understand Me?

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

A few days after I conducted a scrupulosity retreat, one of my confreres asked, “Was anyone actually in attendance at that retreat?” I said the retreat was well attended by a diverse group of people—different ages, professions, and academic achievement. But they had one important thing in common: Each had obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) with a manifestation in matters of religious practice, specifically Roman Catholicism.

My confrere expressed surprise and said dismissively, “I thought all that would be over at this point in our development as Church.”

This very wise priest, a person I wouldn't hesitate to recommend for consistently good pastoral care, labored under a misconception about scrupulosity. He understood it in a traditional way, primarily as the manifestation of a “tender conscience,” for which the best pastoral care is good catechetical training and a wise and prudent confessor.

He seemed to have no knowledge of a much more serious manifestation of scrupulosity for which

there are no quick fixes regardless of how patient or understanding a confessor may be.

People with religious OCD have a psychological imbalance for a prolonged period of time. They have a diminished capacity to form effective and helpful moral judgments when making decisions about their spiritual life. This diminished capacity doesn't result from a lack of catechetical training or from a state of sinfulness. Rather it is a painful and unrelenting torment that strikes at the very heart of something they hold most dear: their understanding, experience, and practice of spirituality—and their relationship with God.



Perhaps I was so attuned to my confrere's attitude because only a couple of days earlier it had been a topic of discussion at the retreat: “Why do so many priests not understand what I'm going through? Why is there no help, no guidance, when I need it most?” The retreatants' passionate and intense agreement on this issue reflects the frustration so many have shared for so long.

I have an answer to this query, although it isn't very satisfying. Many priests don't seem to know anything about scrupulosity because seminary training treats it simply as tender conscience rather than religious OCD. To go further would be far beyond the average seminary curriculum because people with scrupulosity represent a very small number of Catholics. An even smaller number regularly incorporate the sacrament of reconciliation into their spiritual practice. Seminary training must focus on skills needed for ordinary, not extraordinary, pastoral care.

Scrupulosity isn't ordinary in the general Catholic population, but it is an ordinary, daily occurrence for those who have it. They often suffer quietly, believing they're alone and uncared for, which intensifies their pain. Seldom do they share their true anguish except in the unbreakable seal of the anonymous confessional.

My answer to the question "Why don't priests understand me?" probably provides little comfort, but unfortunately I don't foresee a change in pastoral training. The most we can hope for is awareness among priests—especially those who regularly engage in the ministry of reconciliation. If priests can identify scrupulosity when they come face to face with it, they can encourage the person to see a professional counselor. I cannot stress enough how important such encouragement is.

Until pastoral training changes, a patient and kindly confessor is a great support. Share this newsletter with your confessor regularly. Priests often seek advice and encouragement from other priests; the more who understand that scrupulosity is more than a tender conscience—that it's the religious manifestation of OCD and needs to be treated by a professional counselor—the better we'll all be.



God Is Good All the Time

The Lord is good to those who seek Him." Even past sins cannot prevent us from becoming a saint if we sincerely desire it. The Apostle tells us: "By turning everything to their good, God cooperates with all those who love Him" (Romans 8:28). So even past sins can contribute to our holiness because the memory of them keeps us more humble and more grateful, and because they help us to realize the favors God showers on us, even after we have offended Him.

From Lent and Easter Wisdom From St. Alphonsus Liguori
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Searching for God

The following is adapted from *Making a Case for God: Faithful Encounters* by William P. Clark, OMI (Liguori Publications, © 2013).

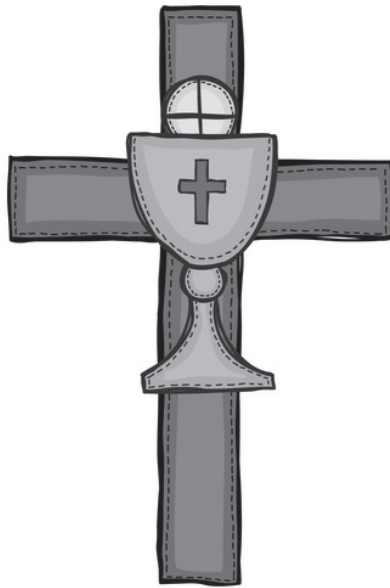
A certain darkness always characterizes the search for God. In his first letter to Timothy, Saint Paul speaks of God, “who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, and whom no human being has seen or can see” (1 Timothy 6:16). Even with the light of faith the darkness is not entirely lifted. If it were, we would stop searching. Another way to picture it is as if we are at the “Gate of the Year” saying, “Give me a light that I might tread safely into the Unknown” and getting the response, “Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way” (*God Knows* by Minnie Louise Haskins).

A contemporary example of someone experiencing that “darkness” is Blessed Mother Teresa. After her death it became clear from her letters that she did not feel God’s presence during the last fifty years of her life. She suffered an enduring feeling that Jesus had abandoned her. But what is amazing in that story is her

unrelenting faith. For it was that fear of abandonment that helped her to continue on in faith, through darkness, and always believing. Persons having such an experience will, no doubt, be tempted to give up, to live in fear and to repeat the lament addressed to God by Saint Teresa of Ávila: “If this is the way you treat your friends, it is no wonder you have so few.” Yet from Mother Teresa, we can learn to carry on in faith. Otherwise we stop searching and, thus, stop living.

The question in a moment of darkness, then, becomes one of how to persevere. When experiencing darkness, it is important to maintain one’s devotion. Devotion here does not mean one or the other of the particular devotions one may practice. Rather it is taken to mean the total

religious thrust (*élan*) toward God. But to maintain one’s devotion in that sense in the midst of darkness is possible only with the help of grace. Only the mystic recognizes God’s presence in anything he or she happens to be looking at.





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MAILBOX

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Q *We never hear anything about the precepts of the Church. Can you review them?*

A The precepts are outlined in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2041–2043): You must go to Mass on Saturday evening or Sundays and on holy days of obligation and rest from servile labor on Sundays, confess your sins at least once a year, receive the Eucharist at least during the Easter season, observe the Church's days of fasting and abstinence, and help provide for the Church.

The *Catechism* says, "The obligatory character of these positive laws decreed by the pastoral authorities is meant to guarantee to the faithful the very necessary minimum in the spirit of prayer and moral effort, in the growth in love of God and neighbor."

Q *Is there any way to receive the sacrament of reconciliation online? I think this would be a great service to people who can't get to church.*

A When Archbishop John Foley served as the president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, he was asked this question. He replied, "The sacrament of confession requires the physical presence of the priest and the penitent. Privacy is absolutely not guaranteed on the Internet, and there is no certainty as to the identity of the two parties to the communication. You can't have confession by e-mail, any more than you can have it by telephone or letter." The sacrament of confession must always take place in "the sacramental context of a personal encounter."

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