

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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## A Phone Conversation

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

I received a call the other day from a member of our SA community. She worked very hard to talk with me, even going so far as to misrepresent herself to the parish office staff. She knew that if she identified herself as an SA member, I wouldn't accept her call.

I have an ironclad policy not to talk on the phone to SA members because both the caller and I end up frustrated. The dynamic of a phone conversation is not helpful with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). Face-to-face interaction is essential.

But this caller persisted and got through. She tried at first not to bring up the real purpose of her call, engaging me in casual conversation. However, when she identified the true reason for her call, I interrupted her. I said I couldn't make an exception to my policy. She persisted and pleaded with me to answer "one simple question."

I knew it wouldn't be only one question. If that were possible, I'd be happy to talk to as many people as possible. But, despite my better judgment, I let her ask the "simple" question.

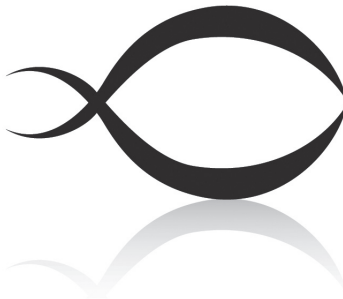
She said, "I had a doubt, and I immediately understood that the doubt wasn't clear and certain. Immediately after I experienced the doubt, I experienced a flood of doubts, and now I'm all confused."

I interrupted her. "Let me strongly state that the clear and certain answer to your doubt was correct. You recognized it as a doubt generated by your scrupulosity and OCD. That's why we call it the doubting disease. Everything after the initial doubt—let me repeat, *everything* after the doubt—is a manifestation of your OCD."

"You don't understand," she interjected.

"But I do understand," I insisted. "You had a doubt you instinctively recognized as not clear and certain. You didn't stop at that point and accept your instinct;

instead, you engaged your OCD, and now you're flooded with doubts, questions, and anxiety. Let me repeat: Everything after the initial doubt—*let me repeat*, everything that occurred after the doubt you instinctively correctly categorized—is a manifestation of your OCD."



She repeated that I didn't understand and then asked the same question with added nuance and detail, including her building anxiety. I repeated that I had clearly understood her dilemma from the start of our conversation. She was now in a full-fledged OCD ritualistic episodic manifestation that was going to play out regardless of what I did or did not say. The conversation was going nowhere fast.

I interrupted one more time. "I clearly understood your question. I clearly understood it wasn't going to be a simple question. I violated my policy, making an exception to continue this conversation. Fifteen minutes into the conversation, we've made no progress. You're frustrated, I'm frustrated, and you're in the full throes of an OCD manifestation. We have no choice but to let it take its course. The energy around this question that's fueling the anxiety and doubt will have to be spent. Eventually you'll let it go, and your anxiety level will go down.

*"Let me repeat once again:* The mistake you made—not the sin, but the mistake—was acting on what you clearly, certainly, and instinctively understood to be a doubt that wasn't rooted in reality. The minute you didn't accept the wisdom of your instinct and trust what you knew to be clear and certain, you unleashed the power of a full-blown OCD episode. I can't help you. It has to play itself out.

"But you *can* learn from this. The next time you have a doubt that you clearly and certainly realize isn't real, accept and act on your instinct imme-

diately. If you don't, you'll engage the energy and anxiety of your OCD, and you'll be right back in the circumstance you find yourself in at this moment."

She interrupted me: "You don't understand." I interrupted her and declared, "I most certainly do understand. I've told you everything I know. I've violated an ironclad policy. I've engaged you and your OCD manifestation. I've honestly said there's nothing I can do. And now I'm going to inform you—and this is going to upset you—that this call is over. I'm going to hang up. Please don't contact me again. You'll only end up frustrated, as will I. A phone conversation isn't helpful. God bless you."

I hung up and sat at my desk, letting the waves of frustration pour over me. I let the manifestation of helplessness come again into my consciousness, knowing full well I could do nothing for her despite my skill level and my care and concern.

And I resolved yet again not to engage in phone conversations that are counterproductive and probably even harmful.

**I've shared this experience** to help SA readers understand why I won't take your calls. It's not that I don't want to help. It's not because I don't have care and concern for every person with scrupulosity—it's because phone calls don't help.

Healing can take place only when you refuse to act on the initial doubt. I know it's terrifying. I know it's a big risk. I know you feel helpless and anxious.

That being said, the only clear and certain experience in the entire OCD episodic manifestation is the first doubt that you instinctively understand is not rooted in reality.

*Everything* that takes place after that first doubt is the fear, anxiety, and helplessness of OCD. To stop the OCD, you have to trust your initial instinct and *refuse to engage the doubt*.



# ***Faithful Meditations***

## **Friday of the Sixteenth Week in Ordinary Time**

The following is adapted from *Faithful Meditations for Every Day in Ordinary Time* by Fr. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney (Liguori Publications, © 2013).

[Jesus answered,] “But as for what was sown on good soil, this is the one who hears the word and understands it, who indeed bears fruit and yields, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty.”

*Matthew 13:23*

**Reflection** The Word of God is the seed of love planted in the good soil of our hearts.

Our hearts may have known sorrow, grief, or pain. Our hearts may be deeply wounded. Our hearts may bear the scars of broken trust, rejection, or abandonment. Yet our hearts remain good soil where the Word of God yields good fruit.

Our hearts may have hardened toward others because of anger or pride. Our hearts may be tortured from guilt or shame. Yet our hearts remain good soil where the Word of God yields good fruit.

We may feel we can't trust our hearts because we've made unwise choices that have harmed ourselves and others. We may feel our hearts are unclean from the way we've conducted our lives. We may feel our hearts will never recover from a lifetime of self-abuse, self-hatred, and self-denial. Yet our hearts remain good soil where the Word of God yields good fruit.

The Word of God touches the sadness, shame, and wounds that have been part of our human experience. The Word of God gently opens the closed spaces of our hearts to feel the warmth and comfort of God's love. The Word of God works in our hearts to heal us from all that prevents us from loving ourselves and our neighbors.

**Ponder** What prevents me from reading and understanding the Word of God?

**Prayer** Lord, your Word consoles and gladdens me in my sorrow. Open my heart to welcome your Word that I may share your love and compassion with all my sisters and brothers.

**Practice** Today I will be faithful by reading Matthew 13:18–23.





SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS

# MAILBOX

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**Q** *We have a new pastor, and I'm sure he's a liberal. When I ask a question about morality, he frequently contradicts my previous pastor. Now I'm confused. Should I ask another priest whom I understand to be more traditional and trustworthy?*

**A** What makes you so certain the advice of a third priest is going to clarify things? You were satisfied with the advice you received from your former pastor. Why did you reopen this can of worms by engaging a new pastor in the same conversation?

You've asked enough questions and tested enough pastors. Let it rest.

**Q** *My confessor says I should go to Communion whenever I attend Mass, regardless of how I feel. He says there is no reason to deprive myself of the grace of Communion and the comfort of receiving Jesus in the Eucharist. Do you agree?*

**A** I agree wholeheartedly. That's also the advice that has been consistently shared in this newsletter by every priest director of SA from the very beginning, and it's the advice of the saints and holy confessors we hold in such high esteem in our Catholic Tradition.



## OCD RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY

Massachusetts General Hospital and Nova Southeastern University are studying scrupulous OCD. For more information, visit our website: [mission.liguori.org/newsletters/scrupanon.htm](http://mission.liguori.org/newsletters/scrupanon.htm)

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