

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Scrupulous Anonymous
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Living the Questions

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa

I was recently reading a heavy theological tome that proposed a new way to think about God and the relationship between God and creation. The book is a discussion of cosmic theology and the possibility of salvation and redemption that is much more universal than anyone might imagine.

Although I enjoyed the book, I won't get into the theological arguments presented in it. But I will summarize one of the author's points that might be helpful for people with scrupulosity: *The weakness of your belief is in direct proportion to the intensity of your orthodoxy.*

In other words, intense effort to make yourself believe something is an indication of intense struggle, not intense conviction.

Convictions have a way of being quietly present, deeply rooted, and anchored within the core of who we are. They represent our best selves, and they have a calming effect—our convictions exist with very little bravado and emotion. That's most often not the case with ideas, feelings, and experiences we're struggling to place within our value system.

For most people with scrupulosity, buried beneath emotional intensity and overwhelming feelings of guilt and anxiety is the realization that they are loved by God. Ironically, this very conviction fuels scrupulous doubts and emotions: They wouldn't have scrupulosity if they didn't believe they're loved by God and if they didn't care about their relationship with God. It is *because* they love, and *because*

they know they're loved, that their scrupulosity has power in their lives.

People with scrupulosity struggle intensely with sins that are mostly imaginary. They believe the struggle somehow places their love for God and God's love for them in mortal peril. The more they pronounce their guilt and try to take responsibility for the imagined sins they didn't choose to commit, the stronger the feeling becomes.

When people with scrupulosity try to explain their "guilt," they usually realize that they're actually talking about the fear of sin and not sin itself. This realization is often the result of a helpful therapy session and/or discussion with a spiritual director or confessor.

People with scrupulosity intuitively understand the craziness of this contradiction and understand that it is the "tug and pull" of their scrupulosity. They also understand that the intensity of the emotions of this dynamic wears them down and leads to a sense of defeat and helplessness. In the midst of this exhaustion, they stubbornly cling to the orthodoxy of their feelings and emotions, all the while not really convinced that it is anything other than the manifestation of the affliction. In a very real sense, the orthodoxy and the ritualistic behavior that supports it become the focus of their struggle.

I believe that the strongest feeling people with scrupulosity deal with is the exaggerated fear that their mortal soul is in danger of condemnation. The second strongest feeling is anxiety.

Doubt is the third and weakest feeling associated with scrupulosity even though it's the most persistent. It's why so many with scrupulosity believe they can research their scrupulosity away. They believe that once their doubt is managed or controlled,

everything else will fall into place. This is a futile approach, because the energy devoted to the research merely fuels the doubt and intensifies the anxiety.

What happens when we turn the whole process upside down? Instead of spending our time and effort trying to *answer* the questions, why not *live* with the questions? Why not choose to acknowledge the anxiety? Why not devote significant time and energy and effort dealing with the strongest conviction: our love for God and God's love for us?

Is it possible that love is the answer?

What comes to my mind at this point are very famous prayers of abandonment to the will of God, prayers of abandonment to living the questions that have been prayed by the saints in our spiritual tradition. One such prayer is by St. Ignatius of Loyola:

Take, O Lord, and receive my entire liberty, my memory, my understanding and my whole will. All that I am, all that I have, Thou hast given me, and I give it back again to Thee, to be disposed of according to Thy good pleasure. Give me only Thy love and Thy grace; with these I am rich enough.

Yet another idea once proposed in prayer by Thomas Merton, a contemporary mystic for our day, summarized his commitment to abandonment by acknowledging that he was often unsure of God's will, but he firmly believed that his effort to try to discover the will of God was all that was required.

Effort—*not perfection*—might be the best spiritual practice we can engage in.

Reflection

Adapted from *Faithful Meditations for Every Day of Ordinary Time (Weeks 11–22)*
by Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney (Liguori Publications, © 2013).

We have nothing to fear from coming to meet a kind and loving God. We can feel free to bring all of our demons—our errors, our misdeeds, our failures, our defects of character—to God and know that God will treat us tenderly and kindly. God never abandons us. God loves us just as we are, with all our imperfections, talents, and gifts.

All that we are is a gift from God. Yet all too often we're ashamed of our imperfections. We see our mistakes and feel we're flawed beyond repair. Sometimes we're possessed by negative thinking. When we become aware of our mental, emotional,

physical, or spiritual limitations, we trust that God's Spirit is moving to transform us and help us embrace a new way of being.

All that we are is a gift from God. We need to feel free to bring our talents and strengths to God too. Each of us has unique gifts to share. We can spend time in prayer and meditation to discern how best to use them. We have all we need to make a positive difference.

Our challenge always is to listen to the Spirit and go where it leads us. It may feel like we're diving off a cliff into the unknown, but with faith in God's goodness and love, we find the courage to take the plunge.

Ponder: What am I afraid to bring to God?

Prayer: Lord, you have made me in your image of goodness and love. I offer you all my weakness and all my strength. Show me how to use them to help others.

Practice: Today I will be faithful by presenting myself to God in prayer.

Scrupulous Anonymous Retreats

Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

Friday, Sept. 25 – Sunday, Sept. 27, 2015

Cedarbrake Catholic Retreat Center
5602 Highway 317
Belton, TX 76513
254-780-2436

Friday, Jan. 15 – Sunday, Jan. 17, 2016

Spiritual Life Center (Wichita, KS)
7100 East 45th Street North
Bel Aire, KS 67226
316-744-0167



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS

MAILBOX

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NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

Q *I freely choose to attend daily Mass because I want to be present for the Mass, but I attend Sunday Mass because it is an obligation. I wish Sunday Mass made me feel the way I feel at daily Mass.*

A You've moved well beyond the point of obligation and are incorporating your daily attendance at Mass into your spiritual practice.

I suggest you stop judging and trying to measure your response and just be present and enjoy your attendance at each Mass, whenever it may be scheduled. Trying to discern the difference in how you feel about your attendance is a useless exercise.

Q *I understand that part of the issue with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and scrupulosity is the constant questioning. But is every question a manifestation of my OCD, or is there such a thing as a normal question?*

A Questions are an important part of learning and living. It's impossible to live without them. So yes, people with scrupulosity and OCD can—and should—have normal, healthy questions.

But when the questions go beyond the need for information, your OCD is manifested—like when you're asking a question about the answer to your question, which was an answer to your question, which prompted the original question.

See the difference?

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