

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

PUBLISHED EACH MONTH BY THE REDEMPТОRISTS

August 2009
Vol. 46, No. 8



Scrupulous Anonymous
One Liguori Drive
Liguori, MO 63057-9999

Unraveling Scrupulosity

PART ONE

by Thomas M. Santa, C.Ss.R.

This is the first installment in a three-part series on the cognitive, behavioral, social and affective symptoms of scrupulosity.

Mental health professionals have identified at least six significant cognitive features of scrupulosity.

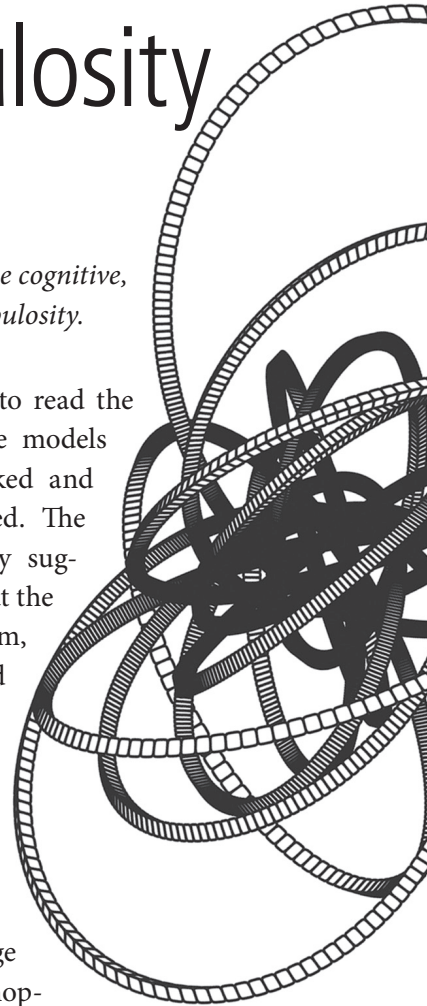
1. An exaggerated misconception of sin and unacceptable behavior

The most significant feature, which I identified in my book *Understanding Scrupulosity*, includes “a habitual state of mind that, because of an unreasonable fear of sin, inclines a person to judge certain thoughts or actions to be sinful when they are not” (page 7). An exaggerated sense of sin and misconduct often leads to a hypervigilant state of conscience and anxiety.

For example, a person reading the Sunday newspaper sees an advertisement for underwear. Advertisements are often designed to suggest and provoke, and if this one is successful, the person may conclude he or she is guilty of a sin of impurity: The person was reading the paper.

The person chose to read the advertisement. The models are somewhat naked and provocatively posed. The presence of nudity suggests sexuality, or at the very least, eroticism, which is perceived as against the commandments of God.

In this example, the vast majority of people would simply turn the page unless they were shopping for underwear. A hypervigilant scrupulous person, however, may be filled with anxiety even after turning the page, because of his or her perceived sinfulness.



2. Near-constant confusion and doubt

In his 1995 book on scrupulosity, Dr. Joseph W. Ciarrocchi found that a seemingly ever-present uncertainty about what constitutes good moral behavior (grace) or bad moral behavior (sin) was such a prominent feature of scrupulosity that he nicknamed scrupulosity “the doubting disease” (*The Doubting Disease: Help for Scrupulosity and Its Compulsions*, Paulist Press, 1995).

Many readers of this newsletter could no doubt offer countless examples from their own lives of this constant doubt. For a scrupulous person, doubt seems always in the forefront of a thought or action; at the very least, it’s a kind of “background noise.”

3. Rumination

In the third cognitive feature of scrupulosity, the person spends an inordinate amount of time breaking each thought or action down to its smallest component. This rumination goes well beyond what occurs in some spiritual practices—a daily examination of conscience, for example.

A meticulous review of each thought, word, or action has never been an essential component of *any* spiritual path. It’s not even required for the sacrament of reconciliation. So for a person with scrupulosity to

attempt this kind of examination is not helpful. It will never provide the satisfaction or sense of completion the person envisions; in fact, it will have the opposite effect: A detailed examination of conscience escalates anxiety, and ever more doubt and confusion will result.

For this reason, under no circumstances should people with scrupulosity

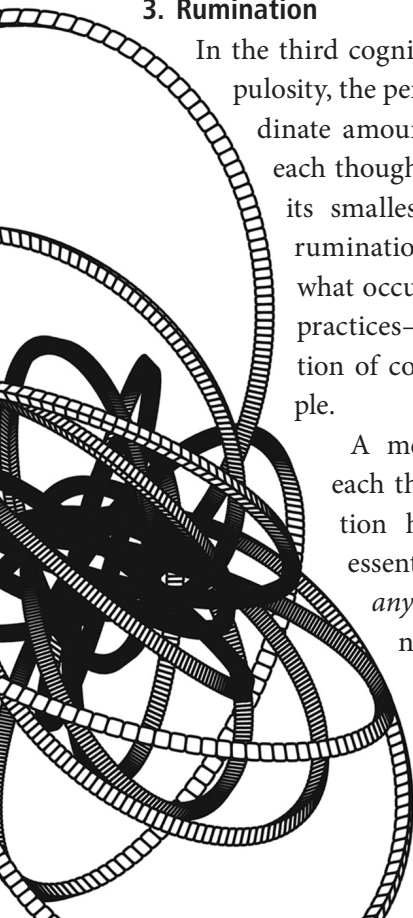
- make a general confession of sins,
- mention any “past sin” (even as a devotional practice), or
- repeat the confession of a sin that has been confessed in a prior confession, no matter how “real” it seems at that moment.

These actions may be worthy of praise for a person who doesn’t have scrupulosity, but they will simply escalate a scrupulous person’s doubt and confusion. These actions are counter-productive, so it’s well worth the effort to avoid these practices.

4. Making mountains out of molehills

A fourth cognitive feature of scrupulosity is the tendency to assume the most negative possible conclusion in any situation. For example, an unlocked door or a stove that is left on is perceived and feared as something that will directly result in mass destruction or the total loss of something of great value.

If the error is in the realm of the spiritual or religious, the results are no less dire: Lipstick breaks the eucharistic fast and leads to mortal sin, or a bad thought about another person while in line for Communion results in sacrilege. There is no place for a simple mistake or even ordinary human behavior.



5. Obsession with religious issues

The fifth cognitive feature is particularly destructive. I've seen it deprive wonderful men and women of any chance for personal peace or even simple satisfaction. Scrupulous people who become consumed with religious issues and the possible moral implications and potential pitfalls of everyday life perceive each experience through the prism of their relationship with God. Their laser-like focus on the details of life consume their energy and, in the process, makes them more vulnerable to the anxiety, frustration, and disappointments all humans routinely encounter.

6. Limited understanding of "normal"

The sixth cognitive feature is related to the fifth: scrupulous people often have a severely limited concept and understanding of what a "normal or ordinary" life might be. They cannot imagine or comprehend how it could be possible to live a life not filled with turmoil, fear, anxiety, guilt, and shame. They might imagine such a life to be possible, but it's with the same kind of understanding one might have about life on the Starship Enterprise in the movie *Star Trek*: It's only so much fiction—certainly not reality.

Next Month: The behavioral, social and affective symptoms of scrupulosity.

The Gift of Our Divine Identity

The following is adapted from *Why God Loves Us...No Matter What*
by Ken Sedlak, C.Ss.R. (© 2007, Liguori Publications).

God walks among us as one like us. The Divine walks among us to manifest the reality and closeness of divine presence. So close, and so real, the divine outpouring of love is the source of our reality. When we try to understand ourselves, when we ask "Who am I?" we must more accurately ask, "Whose am I?" We are Divine Love's continued expression.

I am, you are, we are the outpouring of love. We are loved absolutely and unconditionally or we would not exist. Spirituality is about letting this reality permeate every aspect of our being, psyche, understanding, and experience. Spirituality



works by letting go, letting ourselves be taught to trust.

This is not something we do for ourselves. We are brought into this awareness, gently guided and healed by Love. It is not a gap we can ford on our own. This is why Love manifests itself in the Word become flesh.

God identifies with our humanness as the only way we can be healed and brought to our wholeness. Flesh and blood, here and now, is where God works with us. Only by being as human as we can be are we able to be truly and fully like our brother, Jesus. In opening up to the vulnerability of being human, we find the divine alive within us.



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

One Liguori Drive • Liguori, MO 63057-9999

Q *I've asked two priests for advice and direction with a problem. I also read every article I can find on the subject. What else am I required to do to solve my dilemma?*

A You've been very responsible in trying to form your conscience, and you've probably made more effort than many others would. Yet, despite your effort and goodwill, you haven't found clarity.

The next step is to acknowledge that not every decision, no matter how serious it might be, is clear-cut or black and white. Sometimes even after study, prayer, and the best possible discernment, the answer we seek or the direction we might take is still not clear. At such a moment we must simply make a decision that seems to be the best one we can make and then trust that all of the effort we put into making that decision is pleasing to God.

Q *My husband and I want to celebrate our fiftieth wedding anniversary with a 14-day cruise. I'm not sure we'll be able to fulfill our Sunday obligation. Should we cancel the cruise if we cannot be absolutely certain we can go to Mass?*

A Most certainly not. You're not choosing to go on the cruise so you can miss Sunday Mass. You're going on the cruise to celebrate God's gift of grace to you for fifty years of married life.

Cruise lines are accustomed to serving their Catholic customers' needs, so I wouldn't be surprised to hear they offer Sunday Mass.

But even if they haven't, take the trip in good conscience and enjoy yourself. If Mass isn't available, set aside an hour on Sunday morning to pray with your husband in thanksgiving for the grace the Lord has given you.



Attention Readers!

Fr. Westly and Fr. Santa are no longer able to respond to individual letters, and the sa@liguori.org e-mail address has been closed. We will, however, continue to answer commonly asked questions in *Scrupulous Anonymous*. Send your questions to **SA Mailbox, One Liguori Drive, Liguori, MO 63057.**

Please help us continue Scrupulous Anonymous and other Liguori Publications ministries by making a tax-deductible donation or remembering us in your will. Our legal title is Redemptorist Fathers dba Liguori Publications, Federal ID 43-0653409. To make a donation, please use the enclosed envelope or mail to Liguori Publications, One Liguori Drive, Liguori, MO 63057.