

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Scrupulous Anonymous
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SA Mailbox

Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

The SA mailbox is overflowing with questions, so I'm devoting this month's column to your letters.

Q *I can't stop blaspheming against the Holy Spirit. It's even made its way into my prayer. I'm convinced this is the result of serious sins I've committed.*

This question, which never seems to go away, is rooted in an experience that terrifies each person who asks it.

Through the years—repeatedly and without fail or hesitation—the response of SA directors to this question has remained consistent: you are **not** engaging in the sin of blasphemy. You **are** experiencing intense, unwelcome, anxiety-producing thoughts, but they're not the result of the devil's temptation. Your thoughts are not sinful, and you're not responsible for them.

In another part of your letter, you say that other priests have contradicted this advice,

but I assure you this problem is **not** caused by demonic possession. You do **not** need an exorcism.

What you're experiencing is not spiritual warfare, and it's not God's punishment—it is a medical condition. You say you're taking medication prescribed by a doctor. Don't stop taking your medicine, but do tell your doctor you're having these thoughts. He or she will adjust your treatment.



Q *I eat at the Senior Center every day. I say grace in private before I eat. Very few Catholics eat there, so I don't make the Sign of the Cross before meals. Do I sin if I don't make the Sign of the Cross in public as long as I still say my private prayer?*

A You don't sin if you don't make the Sign of the Cross. You should be commended for taking the time to say a prayer of thanksgiving and blessing in a public place. That's uncommon today, and when it happens in a manner that is respectful of everyone else, it should be applauded.

Q *I'm a young woman in my early twenties. I feel called to get married someday, but I'm extremely worried about passing along my scrupulosity to my kids. How can I put my heart at ease about this?*

A The best advice I've ever received about the future is to "participate and not anticipate." Live your life as it unfolds as a gift from God. Don't become preoccupied with what may or may not happen.

Most people—not just those with scrupulosity—have anxiety about an opportunity or challenge that may or may not happen. You just have to trust that grace will be given to you as you need it.

The medical profession agrees that scrupulosity cannot be passed on to your children like eye color or other DNA-based attributes and that children raised with a scrupulous parent do not necessarily become scrupulous. You can teach your children to have a tender conscience, perhaps, but you cannot pass scrupulosity to them. To become scrupulous, they must also have an active physical and/or psychological disposition.

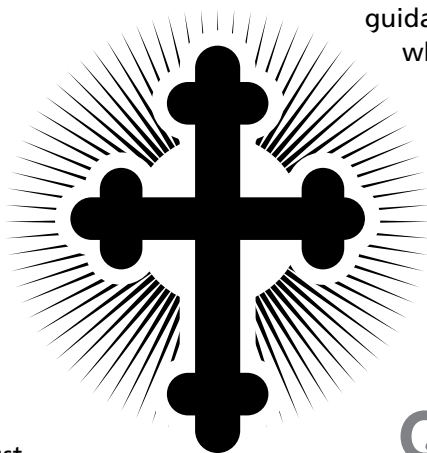
Q *I have obsessive-compulsive disorder scrupulosity that includes intrusive thoughts about God. Can I try exposure and response prevention (ERP) therapy? Doing it would mean purposely thinking the intrusive thoughts. Is that then a sin?*

A In ERP, patients are carefully exposed to anxiety-causing agents or activities in an effort to reduce anxiety through

desensitization. ERP is a well-documented, well-accepted form of therapy that has proved to be very effective and helpful. I believe this therapy should not be prohibited

if you're receiving it under the care and guidance of a medical practitioner who takes reasonable care in applying the therapy by, for example, not using the name of God in vain for shock value.

My advice is to try the ERP therapy. It may well be a gift of God's grace for you.



Q *I attended nine first Fridays to receive the promise made by Christ to St. Margaret Mary Alacoque. However, at that time I wasn't as religious or as devoted to the Sacred Heart of Jesus as I am now, and I may not have attended the Masses with the needed devotion. Should I do the novena again?*

A Please don't complicate what has been useful for you by doubting whether your effort was pure enough or satisfying enough. Even if you complete the devotions again perfectly, you'll discover some form of incompleteness that will make you doubt the efficacy of what you're doing. That's why scrupulosity is often called the doubting disease.

Even if you continue to practice something over and over until you perceive that it's perfect, you'll never stop doubting. All you'll do is guarantee that your scrupulosity will remain strong and vibrant. Resist the impulse to repeat the practice, and you'll be much better off.

Catholic and Cornered

The following is adapted from *Catholic and Cornered: Answers to Common Questions About Your Faith* by Kenneth L. Parker (Liguori Publications, © 2011).

Do Catholics believe that non-Catholics can be saved?

Yes. At the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), the bishops prepared a document called *In Our Time* (*Nostra Aetate*), which clarified that God is present to believers in other Christian traditions, in non-Christian religions, and even in those who are open to the spirit but not connected to a religion. Pope John Paul II famously affirmed this when he gathered 160 world religious leaders (Christian and non-Christian) at Assisi, Italy, in 1986, and they prayed together for peace.

Catholics understand that the love of God is ultimately a mystery and much bigger than human understanding can comprehend.

Do Catholics worship Mary and the saints?

No, but we do admire them in the same way Protestants admire Martin Luther, John Wesley, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, or C.S. Lewis. The great difference is that we believe that our experience of Christian community extends to those who are no longer living and that their prayers can be offered up on our behalf. For Catholics, the Church is a huge community, and we are encouraged to include the dead in our circle of prayer partners.

This concept was very difficult for my mother to understand until Dad died. She no longer has a problem with the idea of asking Dad to pray for our family and friends and happily reflects on how his prayers have influenced the course of her life and those of her children.



Q *What makes a thought a sin? Is just thinking the words a sin, or does the person have to mean the words? I don't mean them. I just think them because I'm trying NOT to think them. I'm so afraid God will think I don't care or that I'd rather be evil than good.*

A Thinking isn't a sin. Human beings don't have the power to make things happen simply by thinking about them. I can think so-called bad thoughts about someone all day. I may even "entertain" such thoughts. But in the end, my thoughts have no effect on the person or event. They're just thoughts—nothing more, nothing less.

If, on the other hand, I use my God-given ability to think, plan, and then rationalize a set of actions I plan to put into motion to cause a specific outcome, those thoughts may indeed be sinful because they're part of the process of making some event or experience happen.

Q *About five years ago we refused to pay a bill for a call we didn't think we'd made. Later we realized we had indeed made that call, but we never offered to pay for it. I sent money to a charity to make up for the error. Was that sufficient?*

A Yes, it's more than enough. To maintain good customer relations, businesses freely extend credit to their customers. They see this as a cost of doing business and build it into their financial plan. When you had the charge removed, you honestly believed you hadn't made the call, so there's no need to return the money. The company sees it as the price of doing business and nothing more.

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 and click on RRC Calendar



Friday, Dec. 7 – Sunday, Dec. 9

Perpetual Help Retreat Center,
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