

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Scrupulous Anonymous  
One Liguori Drive  
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## Unraveling Scrupulosity

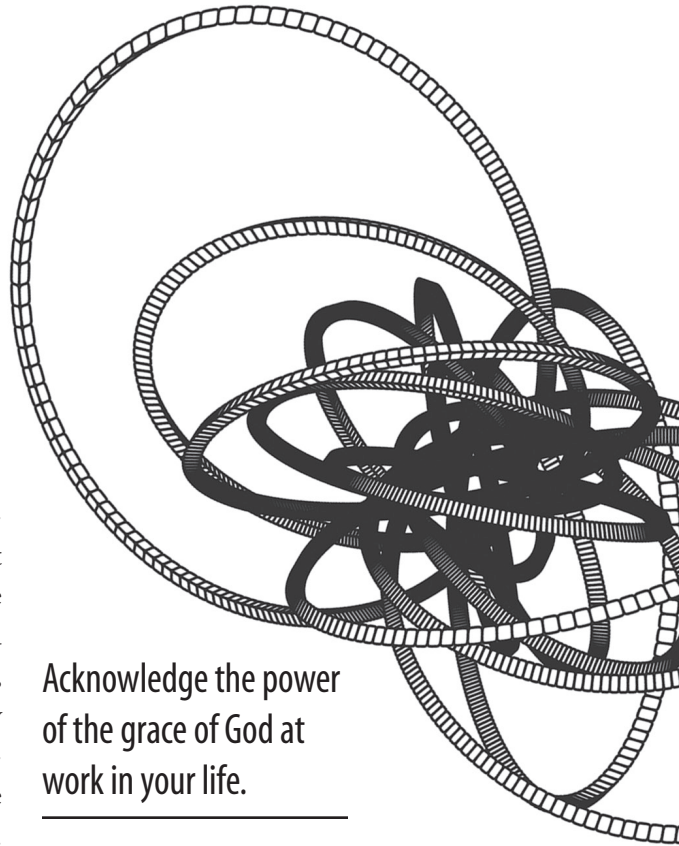
### PART THREE

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

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

The causes of scrupulosity have long perplexed not only priests and confessors, but medical professionals as well. Although we're long past the time when we routinely classified scrupulosity as a tender or delicate conscience, we're still not out of the woods. We've had many false starts identifying the probable psychological roots of the disorder—indeed, some of the working theories have been potentially harmful. For example, early psychodynamic theories proposed that scrupulosity was rooted primarily in the unconscious and in unresolved issues of sexuality. We know now that this isn't true.

Finding the true cause of scrupulosity will lead us to an effective therapy that can be consistently



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of the grace of God at  
work in your life.**

taught to priests and confessors. Inconsistency in pastoral care is routinely cited by people with scrupulosity as one of its unnecessary associated burdens. I understand and empathize with scrupulous people who patiently wait for consistent pastoral care for scrupulosity.

## **APPROACHES TO TREATMENT**

Scrupulosity is being studied by researchers in several fields of psychology and physiology.

### **1. Existential psychology**

This field understands the “whole” person to be more than the sum of his or her parts. Existential psychologists identify the purpose, value, and meaning of their patients’ lives, including the experiences and relationships that provide context, perceptions, and interpretations that are important to them. Their concern with scrupulosity is their patients’ feelings of isolation from society, family, and friends. The way the patient perceives sin, punishment, death, and the afterlife is another essential component of this therapy.

### **2. Behavioral psychology**

The basis of this field is that all behaviors are learned—that external events and stimuli shape who we are as human beings. With scrupulosity, behavioral psychologists try to identify the negative stimuli that caused the intense feelings of guilt and anxiety the patient associates with religious practices.

### **3. Cognitive psychology**

Concerned with advances in the study of memory, language processing, perception, problem-solving, and thinking, cognitive psychologists help patients understand that they have unwittingly misinterpreted or magnified the meaning of benign intrusive thoughts to

catastrophic levels. Excessive guilt, doubt, confusion, moral rumination, catastrophic interpretation, and attention fixation are symptoms or consequences of scrupulosity.

### **4. Religious addiction**

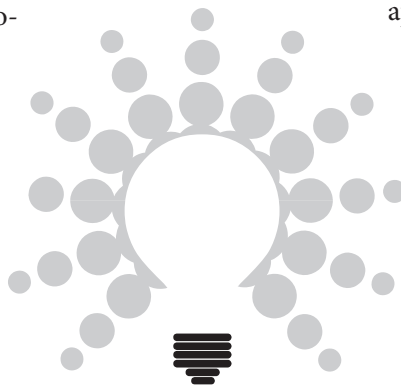
If scrupulosity is primarily a form of addiction, successful treatments for other addictions can be used to treat scrupulosity. A connection between religious obsession and pathologic questioning is possible.

### **5. Neurobiology**

No studies have been done on the possible neurobiologic cause of scrupulosity, but numerous studies of the possible neurobiologic causes of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) could teach us more about the cause(s) of scrupulosity.

## **COME OUT OF THE DARK**

Mental-health professionals are working very hard to identify a single therapeutic approach to treating scrupulosity. But in pastoral care, there seems not to be the same focus or attention. Many confessors and spiritual directors are completely unaware and uninformed about scrupulosity—they experience it solely within the isolated context of the whispered confession of sin behind the screen of the confessional. The whispers, the darkness, and the muffled discussion sustain the anxiety, doubt, and suffering. This dynamic parallels the experience of the leper who strictly adhered to



the code of conduct demanded by the Book of Leviticus: “unclean, unclean!” (13:45).

One small way each of us can change this dynamic is to take a step from darkness into the light of day. First, walk around the screen into the light and sit face to face with your confessor. Then acknowledge the power of the grace of God at work in your life and inform your confessor that you have scrupulosity. Ask if he’s familiar

with it. If he isn’t, offer him the August, September, and October 2009 issues of this newsletter. He can find them, other past issues of *Scrupulous Anonymous*, and more information on scrupulosity at [www.liguori.org](http://www.liguori.org).

These small steps will help you and your confessor begin unraveling scrupulosity in your life.

May God bless you and keep you close to him always.

## Finding God

The following is adapted from *How Can I Find God? The Famous and the Not-So-Famous Consider the Quintessential Question* by James Martin (Liguori Triumph Books, 1997).

God is often at work in finding *you* in experiences of being loved by people whose actions far transcend our limited expectations of what is owed to us in the name of merely human justice or fairness. Your small child jumps into your arms and kisses you just for being her mother; your wife leaves you a sweet note when you arrive home late at night after work. One glimpses God’s amazing kindness in these expressions of love that confound the merely worldly notions of what human beings owe to one another.

God is also present in the experience of witnessing the transforming power of the Word of God. Even when the Word is spoken by ordinary women and men in ordinary ways and settings, one watches in awe to see lives touched, changed, and moved. It is unexpected, inexplicable, in the tiny framework of human reason; but in a framework that includes God, it is gift and encounter.

*Christians, usually after much personal struggle, realize that the answer to the meaning of life is not found in a tidy set of words, but rather in a relationship with God. And like human relationships, the one with God can be more opaque than clear; the relationship with God must include a relationship with all creation, including women and men. The reality is that relationships can be messy.*

From *Living the Ten Commandments As a Catholic Today*, compiled and edited by Mathew Kessler, C.Ss.R. (Liguori Publications, 2009)



# SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS MAILBOX

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**Q** *A priest recommended a book called Dealing With Scruples by Dermot Casey, SJ. It contradicts your advice. Why is this?*

**A** That book was written in 1947, sixty-two years ago. It has a new cover, but it hasn't been revised; it's been re-released by a publisher that reprints "Catholic classics." The material in this book is severely outdated.

The publishers' claim that "the cure for this age-old problem hasn't changed" is untrue. Father Casey wrote within the best spiritual tradition of his day. He couldn't have been aware of obsessive-compulsive disorder or the insights we have in the twenty-first century.

I'll repeat something I've said often: Check the date of any publication on scrupulosity before you read it. That's the only way to be sure you're getting the best pastoral advice.

**Q** *I get very tense and confused at election time. Can you help me?*

**A** The October 2004 issue of this newsletter addressed this issue. If you don't have a paper copy, access it from our Web site, [www.liguori.org](http://www.liguori.org). Scroll to the bottom of the page. Under Spiritual Newsletters, click on *Scrupulous Anonymous*, then click on SA Archives and follow the link to the October 2004 issue of the newsletter. Many people have asked to copy that issue, so it must be helpful.

By the way, the SA archives are full of helpful advice and direction. I suggest you visit the Web site often—perhaps make it part of a regular practice of spiritual reading.

## **2010 Scrupulous Anonymous Retreat**

Friday, May 14, 2010 – Sunday, May 16, 2010

***Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, C.Ss.R.***

Redemptorist Renewal Center, Tucson, Arizona

**For more information, visit [www.desertrenewal.org](http://www.desertrenewal.org) and click on "Events Calendar" or call 520-744-3400.**



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