

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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## From the Simple to the Complex

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa

**O**ne basic truth of the evolving and emerging universe is that all life, all systems, all organisms begin development in a simple state and then evolve into a more complex manifestation. No form of life, matter, or behavior suddenly appears in its complete form; instead, it slowly and patiently evolves. Nothing is exempt from this basic law.

Evolution is a scientific theory, but just because it's "only" a theory doesn't mean it should be dismissed. The word *theory* actually corresponds with a religious word we're more familiar with: *doctrine*. Religious doctrine is a statement that cannot necessarily be proved true, but that doesn't mean it should be dismissed.

In religious traditions, we call the evolution and emergence of truth *revelation*; science prefers to leave it at "evolution and emergence." This important point can be illustrated by traditional Catholic doctrine about the Blessed Mother, originally understood and celebrated as Mary being *theotokos*, the "mother of God."

As more truths about her role and her place in salvation history emerge, men and women of faith

celebrate that she is "blessed among women." The simplicity of the original doctrine has evolved into a more complex and nuanced understanding. For people who challenge the "truth" of what we proclaim, no proof will satisfy—but we can nevertheless trace the doctrine's evolution from simplicity to complexity and deepen our understanding and appreciation.

**S**crupulosity also evolves from the simple to the complex. When we experience the first pangs of scrupulosity, we think it's just a simple case of obsession or compulsion, a simple doubt or unanswered question. As the disorder grows, the questions and anxieties evolve into a complex, tangled web. This is no longer a single compulsion or anxious obsession—it's layer upon layer of meaning, memory, ritual, pain, and suffering.

People with religious scrupulosity often struggle with a complex interpretation of what is required of them in their religious practice, routinely rejecting a simple response and trusting only a complex one. However, a complex response is not a requirement of religious practice—rather, it's a painful manifestation of the turmoil of a scrupulous conscience.

As scrupulosity evolves from a simple impulse to a complex experience, attempts to successfully treat and heal it also become complex—there is no simple answer, no simple path to healing.

**S**ince we cannot go back to the original simple experience and discover a simple answer, is there any hope of healing?

Yes, but many people with scrupulosity don't want to hear the solution.

The most direct path to healing is to acknowledge the complexity of the disease and pray for the grace to accept that it cannot be changed. This is where the truth of what is scientifically understood—the movement from simplicity to complexity—can be religiously experienced:

- You *cannot* outthink scrupulosity.
- You *cannot* arrive at a complete moment of clarity and certitude.
- You *cannot* learn and perfectly practice imagined complex rules of religion in a manner that will give you satisfaction and comfort.

But this is also true:

- You *can* learn to accept that you have this disorder and that it hasn't been either chosen for or inflicted upon you.
- You *can* learn to recognize that questions with layer upon layer of complex doubt and anxiety are the manifestation of the disorder, not authentic, required religious practice.
- You *can* return to simplicity by determining, with the help of God's grace, to embrace the clear manifestations of God's love for you. Everything that seems to complicate that experience may be real, but that's not grace—it's religious scrupulosity.

Science teaches that everything moves from the simple to the complex. People with religious scrupulosity can practice acknowledging this reality, seeking the simple and rejecting the complex.

You needn't be trapped. You *can* choose to live in the freedom of the children of God.

***Scrupulous Anonymous Retreat***

***Presented by Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR***

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

Spiritual Life Center (Wichita, KS)

7100 East 45th Street North

Bel Aire, KS 67226

316-744-0167

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# Reflection

Adapted from *Grateful Meditations for Every Day of Ordinary Time (Weeks 23–34)*  
by Rev. Warren J. Savage and Mary Ann McSweeney (Liguori Publications, © 2013).

We worry so much about our worth. Are we doing enough? Are we proving we're worthwhile? Are we a valuable member of society? Do we have a purpose?

When we worry about what we do, about what we don't do, about our place in the world, about our value as people, we are undervaluing ourselves. We are forgetting that God created each of us in love for the purpose of bearing witness to God's love in the world. We have enough love in our hearts to transform the world. We have enough love in our hearts to heal divisions, promote unity, and perpetuate peace and harmony. Yet when we undervalue ourselves, doubt our

goodness, or lose faith in our place in God's family, we undermine our ability to pour out the love in our hearts. We effectively deny the power of God's Spirit within us.

We must listen when Jesus assures us that God values us. We must believe that God knows and cares how many hairs are on our head. We must trust that God notices us and loves us without condition, without end. We have no need to be afraid of anything or of any person. Nothing can change our intrinsic worth. Nothing can harm our being. Nothing can take away our position as beloved children of God. We are enough just as we are in this moment.

**Ponder:** What do I cherish about myself?

**Prayer:** Lord, I am grateful you love me. Take away my fears, that I may grow in wisdom and compassion. Help me to love my neighbor as myself.

**Practice:** With a grateful heart, I will take time to watch sparrows at work and at play.



SCRUPULOUS ANONYMOUS

# MAILBOX

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NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

**Q** *Why don't you tackle the issue of masturbation in one of your newsletters? I'm sure it would be very helpful to your readers.*

**A** Actually, it would be counterproductive and not at all helpful. Some issues should be discussed only with your confessor, therapist, and/or spiritual director.

Traditional and orthodox Catholic moral theology provides consistently useful and necessary pastoral care. It is best applied within a relationship in which honest dialogue can be shared and experienced.

**Q** *Once again, you've offered advice in the newsletter that contradicts the teaching authority of the Church. We don't read this newsletter to be misled or deceived.*

**A** I'm not repeating the example you gave in your letter because it doesn't support your observation. I offer only Catholic and orthodox pastoral care and direction in this newsletter—to do otherwise would be a disservice to our readers and is not at all helpful. Pastoral care for people with scrupulosity is what we provide each month. That is our only ministry and our only purpose, and we take the responsibility very seriously.

[ScrupulousAnonymous.org](http://ScrupulousAnonymous.org)



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