

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Scrupulous Anonymous  
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## Obsessive Thinking

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



We've made tremendous strides in our understanding of scrupulosity. We're grateful for all this research and study—at the very least, it's helped us understand that we're not alone, abandoned, or uncared for.

But even more research must be done. As it continues, tremendous breakthroughs and progress will seem to accelerate—and then everything will seem to slow to a snail's pace as researchers review components of the condition in far greater detail.

One such component is whether the obsessive religious thought that is part and parcel of the “doubting disease” is significantly different from the generic obsessive thought experienced by people with obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD).

The American Psychiatric Association defines obsessive thinking as “persistent ideas, thoughts, impulses...experienced as intrusive and inappropriate, causing distress” (*Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* [DSM-IV-TR],

Fourth Edition, 2000). People with scrupulosity and OCD will recognize this obsessive thinking as well as the response to it—the compulsive action or ritual of ignoring, suppressing, or neutralizing the thought.

But is there a difference between the generic OCD obsessive thought and the religious manifestation? The initial research suggests that the answer may well be yes.

### DEFINING THE DIFFERENCE

People with OCD often perceive an obsessive thought as having nothing to do with their real life. Because they see the thought as something alien—something outside of who they are—their compulsive reaction is to suppress the thought, ignore it, or simply get rid of it. They treat it as they would a weed in the garden, a stain on a carpet, or a blemish on a piece of fruit. It simply doesn't belong where it is.

An obsessive *religious* thought, on the other hand, *doesn't* seem alien or out of place to the

person thinking it—it's somehow directly *related* to the moral or ethical dilemma they're confronting, and the compulsive or ritualistic response to the obsessive thought is intended not to ignore or suppress the thought, but to resolve the dilemma.

Trying to resolve something and trying to ignore or suppress it are two different things. If we have an unwelcome and uninvited impure thought while in line to receive holy Communion, crossing our hands over our chest and not receiving Communion until we can do so without the presence of the impure thought resolves the dilemma: *I will not receive a [perceived] sacrilegious Communion*. This behavior is not an attempt to ignore or suppress the thought.

### **KNOWING YOUR DIFFERENCE...**

If a person with scrupulosity has obsessive thoughts about religious matters but doesn't respond with truly compulsive behavior, then scrupulosity isn't technically OCD. Although it's too

### **All I Need to Know About Life I Learned From the Bible**

- Miracles happen.
- Somebody loves me, constantly and consistently.
- I am not alone.
- Love transforms people.
- Wonderful things happen in dark places.
- Things may look better in three days.
- A sigh can become a song.
- Tomorrow doesn't have to be the same as yesterday.
- There is a light behind every shadow.

Adapted from *Daily Strength for Daily Needs: One Year of Biblical Inspiration* by Victor M. Parachin (Liguori Publications, © 1998)

early in the research to accept this conclusion as fact, it's an important distinction that can help you in your everyday life:

- Pay attention to your experience of scrupulosity and, by extension, your experience of OCD. Identify any differences in your thoughts and behaviors in a variety of situations.
- Ask yourself whether you have compulsive behavior triggered by obsessive thoughts. For example, you fear you didn't turn off the stove, so you check it three or four times. Or you're obsessed with cleanliness and compulsively wash your hands and use hand sanitizer or sterile household wipes. Most people agree that this kind of behavior is properly understood as OCD. They understand these kinds of thoughts and behaviors to be alien—an appendage to a healthy way of living and thinking.
- Ask yourself whether you engage in behaviors to resolve moral dilemmas that result from obsessive thoughts. For example, the person waiting for Communion we talked about earlier: The person saw the behavior—not receiving Communion—as a resolution to a moral dilemma; the behavior was not an attempt to ignore or suppress the thought.

### **...WILL HELP YOU GET HELP**

If the behaviors in your life are manifestations of OCD, bring them to the attention of your physician. Countless effective remedies are available.

If you identify specific manifestations of religious scrupulosity, bring them to the attention of your confessor and/or spiritual director and pray for the courage to apply the remedies that will bring you the peace you deserve.

# Grace: God's Life Within You

The following is adapted from *The Essential Catholic Handbook: A Summary of Beliefs, Practices, and Prayers* (Liguori Publications, © 2004)

Grace is the Spirit of God who is “poured out into our hearts” (Romans 5:5). The Church makes a distinction between habitual or sanctifying grace and actual grace which helps us do the right thing [*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 368, 733].



to God. Under the Spirit's influence you live a life of love that builds up Christ's Body, the Church. Being “in the Spirit” with the rest of the Church, you live with others in such a way as to build a spirit of love and community wherever you are [1721, 1810].

Grace, the presence to you of God's living, dynamic Spirit, helps you live with a new, abundant inner life that makes you “share in the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), as a son or daughter of God, and a brother or sister—a fellow heir—with Jesus, “the firstborn among many brothers” [357]. (See Romans 8.)

The Spirit's presence helps you live and respond to God in a totally new way. You live a “graced” life that is good, really pleasing

Grace—God's life within you—transforms the whole meaning and direction of your life [1722, 1810]. In grace, Saint Paul declared: “For to me, life is Christ, and death is gain” (Philippians 1:21) [1010, 1698]. Ultimately, grace—God's free gift of himself to you—is life eternal, a life that has already begun. Already, while you are still an earthly pilgrim, grace is “Christ in you, the hope for glory” (Colossians 1:27) [772].

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The Spirit's presence helps you live and respond to God in a totally new way.

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# MAILBOX

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**Q** *My pastor and the visiting priest accept my generic weekly confession with no difficulty. However I worry that another confessor won't accept my generic confession. Every week, from Saturday morning until my confession is over, I feel fear, dread, and slightly ill.*

**A** If it's not one thing, it's another. People with scrupulosity can always find something to worry about, something to be anxious about, something to tie the stomach in knots. In this case, you're worried about something that rarely occurs.

Celebrate the sacrament only when your pastor or a familiar visiting priest is in the confessional. Eliminate the doubt and refuse to give attention to the anxiety. Our Lord doesn't require you to endure this agony week after week. God bless you.



## **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.

**Q** *Should I let my bishop know when my pastor answers a question incorrectly? I'm worried about causing scandal for my pastor.*

**A** The best advice for the scrupulous, repeated often in this column by all of the priest directors of SA, is to tread lightly when you form a judgment about someone. Scandal is a very serious matter. Grave conditions must exist for scandal to occur, and giving incorrect answers to questions doesn't rise to that level.

I sincerely doubt you're piling up possible occasions of sin or even actual demonstrations of sinfulness—you simply have a very delicate conscience, and you most certainly don't need to pepper the bishop with your concerns about your pastor's incorrect answers.

Your energy would be put to better use praying for peace and serenity for yourself, your pastor, and your bishop. God bless you.

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