

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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INTRODUCING OUR NEW WEBSITE

Thanks to your generosity and the hard work of Liguori Publications' web-development team, we now have an updated, secure, searchable website, ScrupulousAnonymous.org! It looks completely different from the old site, but it has everything the old site had and one important new feature: All issues from January 2015 forward are searchable. To find a specific topic, simply type the term in the search field in the lower-left sidebar to get a list of the essays, reflections, and letters that contain that term. The new site has been under construction for more than six months, and during that time we had some security issues; however, those have been resolved, and you can safely explore the new website to your heart's content. Thank you for your patience. Please e-mail questions to newsletter@liguori.org.

Persistent Stubbornness

by Fr. Thomas M. Santa

When I write about scrupulosity, I often refer to fear, guilt, and anxiety as irritating but normal symptoms of this terrible disorder. But there's a particularly maddening symptom I've never discussed in this newsletter: persistent stubbornness.

People with persistent stubbornness refuse to try new behaviors to manage their scrupulosity, insisting that they are and always will be helpless to control it. There's an element of arrogance to this line of thought: They believe that by not trying to remedy

their condition, they will be the best scrupulous people in the world. Those who try to help them are misguided or not sufficiently appreciative of the struggle. No help is useful, no guidance acceptable.

Recently I talked with a woman whose scrupulosity was accompanied by persistent stubbornness. She exhibited a knowing look and false patience as I explained the reality of her situation. The conversation was a total waste of her time and my pastoral effort. She had no intention of considering my suggestions. She was just enduring our conversation

as she waited for an opportunity to illustrate her next point. When I finished, she expected me to compliment her on her dedication, to congratulate her on her ability to be perfectly and completely scrupulous. She was disappointed and perplexed that I couldn't understand what she was trying to accomplish.

I understand how tempting it is to become persistently stubborn when every attempt to fight scrupulosity leads only to more fear, anxiety, and guilt. I understand how someone might conclude that it's better to swim with the tide than to continue to fight what seems to be a losing battle. But it's impossible to be either totally and completely scrupulous *or* totally and completely free of doubt and anxiety. Such perfection at either end of the spectrum is beyond the ability of all human beings, no matter how superhuman their attention and dedication.

If the woman I spoke with had listened, she would have heard about the many members of SA who have made this same mistake. She would have heard that, while people who choose to be persistently stubborn do achieve a small sense of peace and certitude,

it's for only a short time. As time wears on and the demands of scrupulosity intensify, peace gives way to total exhaustion. They weren't managing their disease by cooperating with it; it was managing them. They weren't swimming with the tide; the tide was dragging them around, tossing them from one shore to another, beating them against the rocks, dragging them under.

Instead of escaping the pain and suffering of their disease, they were intensifying it.

The hard truth is that people with scrupulosity must engage with the disease every day. You must work to postpone—even if only for a few minutes—the rituals that intensify the guilt and anxiety.

Every day that you do this, you will not be a victim. You will be a person who believes that God's grace can be manifested powerfully and clearly at least in some moments of your life.

The only place for persistent stubbornness in your life is in your belief in the power of God's grace, mercy, and love—even when all your feelings and struggles seem to be the opposite of what you hope for and desire above all other things.

Reflection

The following is adapted from *With Hearts Full of Joy: Following Christ the Redeemer* by Fr. Mathew J. Kessler and José Antonio Medina (Liguori Publications, © 2010).

Christians believe that not only is Jesus the Son of God; we believe Jesus *is* God. But why would God want to come among us and be one with us? Why would God bother to share our humanity?

We are loved for who we are, created in his image and likeness. Whatever boundary (sin) existed between the divine and the human was overcome in Jesus' birth. Like revelation, the Incarnation is God's movement toward us in love. If every man, woman, and child could feel this unconditional love from both heaven and earth, all would be nice. Unfortunately this doesn't always happen.

Psychologists tell us the human need for acceptance is essential, but distorted self-

perception can diminish how we feel around others. It's not uncommon for shame (embarrassment for who we are) and guilt (embarrassment for what we've done) to distort a healthy self-perception to the point of withdrawal. When we think, incorrectly, that God can't love us because of something we've done or said, we isolate ourselves, shutting ourselves off from the love and support of God and others.

The fact of the Incarnation says we are each loved by God under *all* circumstances and that his presence compels us to see him at work in ourselves and in those around us. Instead of being isolated, we're united by a strong bond that brings into community the human and the divine.

Scrupulosity Research Project

A marriage and family therapy student at Mount Mercy University in Cedar Rapids, Iowa is studying similarities in behaviors and attitudes in people with scrupulosity and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), and she'd appreciate it if you would participate by completing a 10- to 15-minute confidential survey. Participants will be entered into a drawing for a \$20 amazon.com gift card. If you are 18 or older and would like more information, please visit tinyurl.com/qa99Iga.



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MAILBOX

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Q *When I ask two priests for a simple answer to a question, I get one answer from one and a different answer from the other. No two answers are alike. It's very confusing and discouraging.*

A The issue is not with the priests—it's with you. You're trying to duplicate a response in the hope of achieving clarity, but such clarity is elusive. You'll never find a satisfactory answer.

Asking multiple priests will only add to your confusion and discouragement. The only solution is to ask one priest only. Trust in his direction and his advice.

Q *I have a problem with unwanted thoughts, including some that are blasphemous. How can terrible thoughts not be serious sins?*

A I can present a rational argument that since we're not capable of controlling our thoughts, we can't be held responsible. But rational arguments aren't necessarily persuasive.

Everyone has uncontrolled and unwanted thoughts, some disturbing and distressful. The difference between you and them is that you've decided these thoughts are sinful; other people don't make that judgment.

We can't make unwanted thoughts go away. We can, however, stop thinking that having them is sinful. You can do this by choosing to believe that what I'm saying is truthful—and then living and practicing that truth.

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