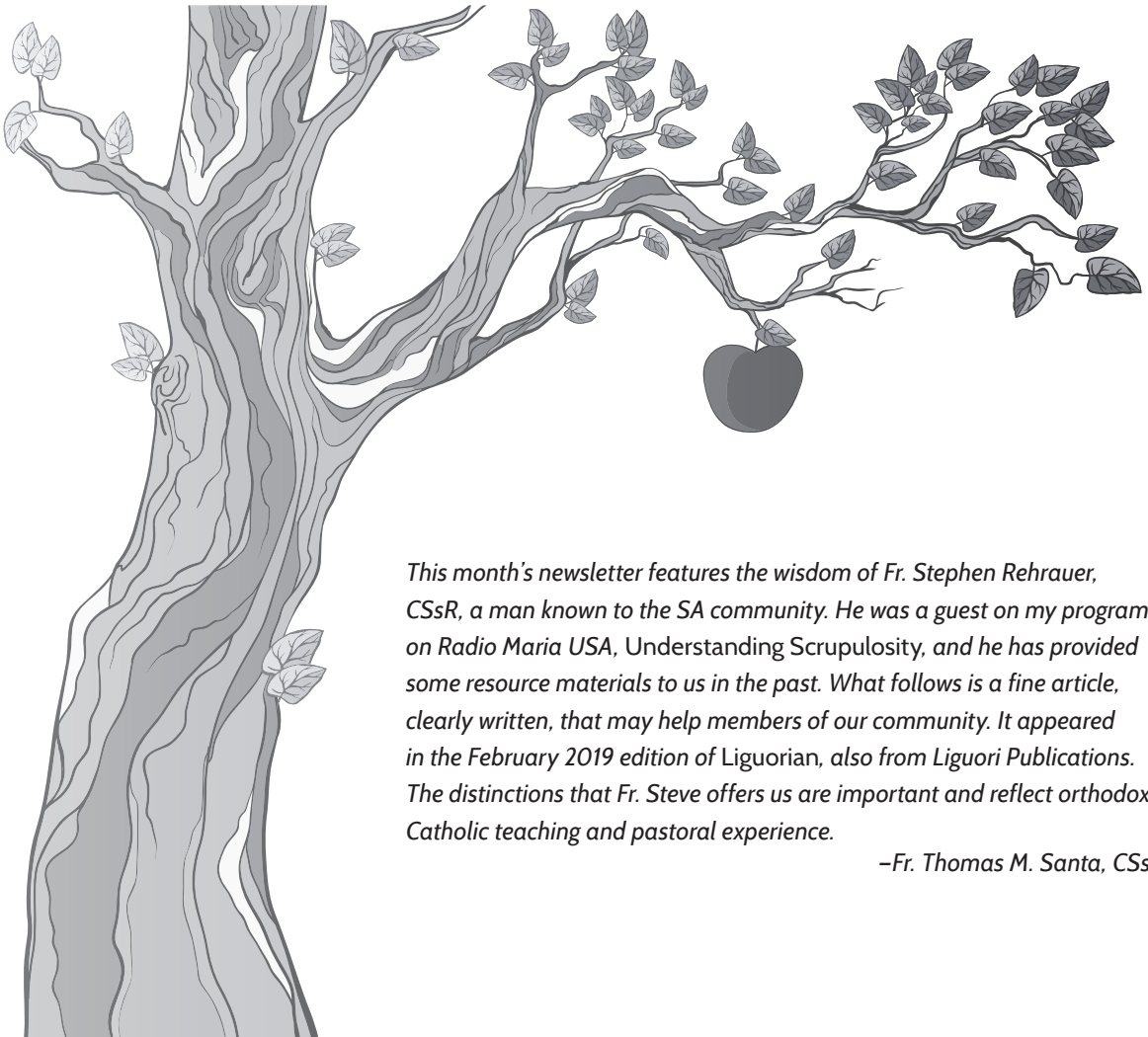




Examining the Gray Matter



This month's newsletter features the wisdom of Fr. Stephen Rehauer, CSsR, a man known to the SA community. He was a guest on my program on Radio Maria USA, Understanding Scrupulosity, and he has provided some resource materials to us in the past. What follows is a fine article, clearly written, that may help members of our community. It appeared in the February 2019 edition of Liguorian, also from Liguori Publications. The distinctions that Fr. Steve offers us are important and reflect orthodox Catholic teaching and pastoral experience.

—Fr. Thomas M. Santa, CSsR

Words often get in the way of meanings.

As a moral theologian, I often use a particular definition, whereas the person with whom I'm speaking may have in mind a different definition. The result is a situation in which neither of us hears the other's point. We're using the same word but without a shared understanding of its meaning. To further complicate matters, in theology, the word sin is subdivided into material and formal, mortal and venial, personal and structural, individual and social, and so on. So when we talk about the application of sin to specific types of actions or choices, it's essential that we have a shared understanding of at least the most basic definition of sin.

The biblical understanding should take precedence. Sin, as most commonly referenced in the Scriptures, means, "to miss the target." I prefer to substitute "point" for "target." When we sin, we miss the point of life. We're created to give glory to God and to authenticate God's image in this world. Any action or choice that doesn't give glory to God, authentically reflect God's goodness, or conform to God's will is one that reveals we have missed the point. In this sense, sin is less about what we have or haven't done. It refers to orienting our lives away from God and goodness.

Given this basic understanding, let's subdivide sin into material and formal sin. Material sin is any action—considered apart from subjective considerations of intention, motivation, knowledge, or freedom in the person who performs these acts—that is objectively evil. This includes acts of theft, adultery, lies, and so forth. The concept of material sin preserves the idea that some actions are wrong by their very nature.

Material sins can be more or less grave, depending on the specific good lost or harm inflicted.

Formal sin adds in the subjective considerations. Formal sin is the free, knowing, and deliberate choice to engage in material sin—to do what we know to be evil. When we say "stealing," we're talking about material sin. This is different from saying that I committed the formal sin of stealing. Here, we mean that I deliberately and freely chose to take what rightfully belongs to another, knowing it was wrong to do so. Material sin is in the act chosen; formal sin is in the will of the one who chooses. It's possible to perform one without the other.

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All formal sin, and only formal sin, affects our relationship with God. The more severe the material gravity of the sin, and the freer and more knowing the choice to commit the material sin, the further away from the point or target our life flies. A mortal sin is one that, in its material aspect, is so grave that it reverses the orientation of our life away from God and toward

evil. Serious and venial sins weaken our minds and wills. Unchallenged, these make it more likely to fall into mortal sin, but they don't completely destroy our relationship of love with God.

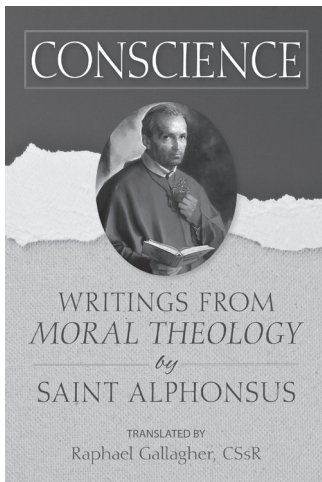
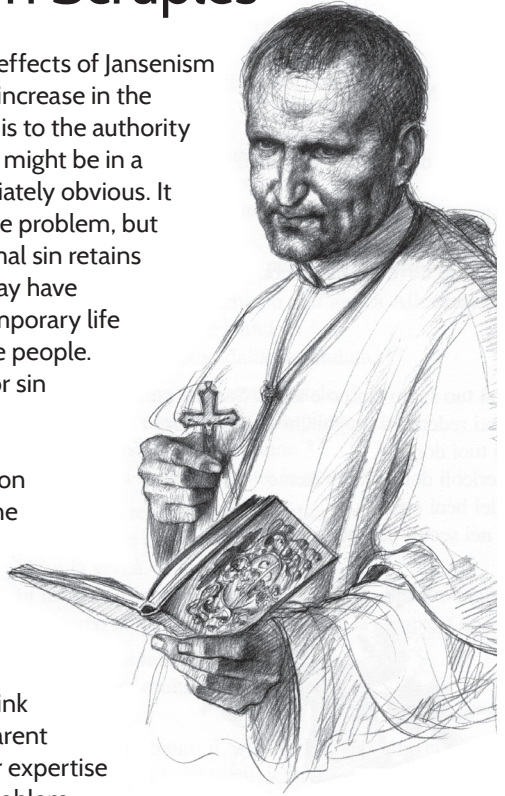
The most important point to remember is that Jesus came into the world so that sin can be forgiven. This is the good news we proclaim, which is the source of humanity's hope. That we sometimes sin is less important than the reality that Christ died to set us free from the power of sin and death over our lives. Where sin abounds, grace abounds even more. ✞

VERY REVEREND STEPHEN REHRAUER, CSSR, is serving his second term as the Provincial Superior of the Redemptorists of the Denver Province. Previously he was a professor of moral theology at the Alphonsian Academy in Rome.

Conscience: St. Alphonsus on Scruples

[During the life of Saint Alphonsus Liguori (1696-1787)], the effects of Jansenism and rigorous moralism on sensitive people contributed to an increase in the illness of scrupulosity. The fundamental appeal of Alphonsus is to the authority of the confessor (that is, for him, of God). How applicable this might be in a different world of differing cultural experiences is not immediately obvious. It remains useful to be reminded that “bad thoughts” are not the problem, but the consent given to them. The necessity of freedom for formal sin retains its importance. The terror-inducing tactics of former times may have disappeared. The dominance of sexualized imagery in contemporary life can cause another sort of scruple-related anxiety for sensitive people. The Alphonsian acknowledgment of freedom as necessary for sin remains valid in this context.

Alphonsus related the problem of scruples to a disturbed power of reasoning (*ob rationem perturbatam*). The emphasis on obedience is to be understood against this background; it is the only way a scrupulous person can retain sanity. The illness of scrupulosity affects all of a person's life. Spiritual progress is affected, also physical and mental health. It is not necessary to conclude that Alphonsus advocates blind obedience as a general norm; he is encouraging a purposeful obedience in a particular context. Only when a person can think rationally can he act freely (*libere*) on the basis of what is apparent (*evidens*). Modern psychological theories can surely add to our expertise on these matters. Alphonsus is concentrating on the moral problem of religious scruples at a particular period. Deprived of the capacity for rational argument and judgment, scrupulous people lack the freedom necessary for sin.



If a person is in error or doubtful about the goodness of an action, no judgment can be made until the error or doubt is cleared up....The correct understanding of doubt (*dubium*) is critical. A doubt is legitimate when the precept to be applied is derived from an imperfect norm—for instance, a norm that has not been properly promulgated or has been abrogated. A legitimate doubt, consequently, justifies not applying a norm. The question then becomes: Can a legitimate doubt be caused by scruples? Alphonsus answers in the affirmative, offering the significant observation that the mind, being clouded by scruples, cannot think properly. A doubt can have its origin in the illness of scruples.

It is ironic how Alphonsus is sometimes quoted to propose a rigorous morality of the type he strove to eradicate. ☼

Adapted from *Conscience: Writings from Moral Theology by Saint Alphonsus*, translated by Fr. Raphael Gallagher, CSsR, (828140) Liguori Publications, 2019. To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

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Q. *Each year I get concerned about the minimal requirements of Easter duty. It's that time of year again, and I can feel my anxiety rising. Any help or direction would be appreciated.*

A. Yours is a common concern in the SA community. The Church's minimal requirements seem to trigger maximum anxiety with some of our readers. I don't know of a single member of the SA community who hasn't fulfilled at least the minimal requirements that the Church directs us to keep for our spiritual growth and development. Minimal requirements are directed toward the men and women of the Church who may not be fully engaged or focused. That's not descriptive of a person with scrupulosity. Please be at peace. You have fulfilled all that is required and perhaps even more than what is required.

Easter • April 21, 2019
He is risen! Alleluia!

Q. *May I attend the wedding of a niece who is getting married in a Methodist Church? She is Catholic but her fiancé is not, and for some reason they have chosen not to be married in the Catholic Church.*

A. Of course you may attend. Nothing stands in the way of your attendance at your niece's wedding. You are free to presume that your niece has engaged in the necessary pastoral counseling that is a routine part of marriage preparation and all is in order. The Church routinely makes provisions for exactly this situation. It is not at all uncommon, and you need not be concerned. Attend the wedding and pray that their marriage is blessed and persevering.



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