



Defining Scrupulosity Correctly

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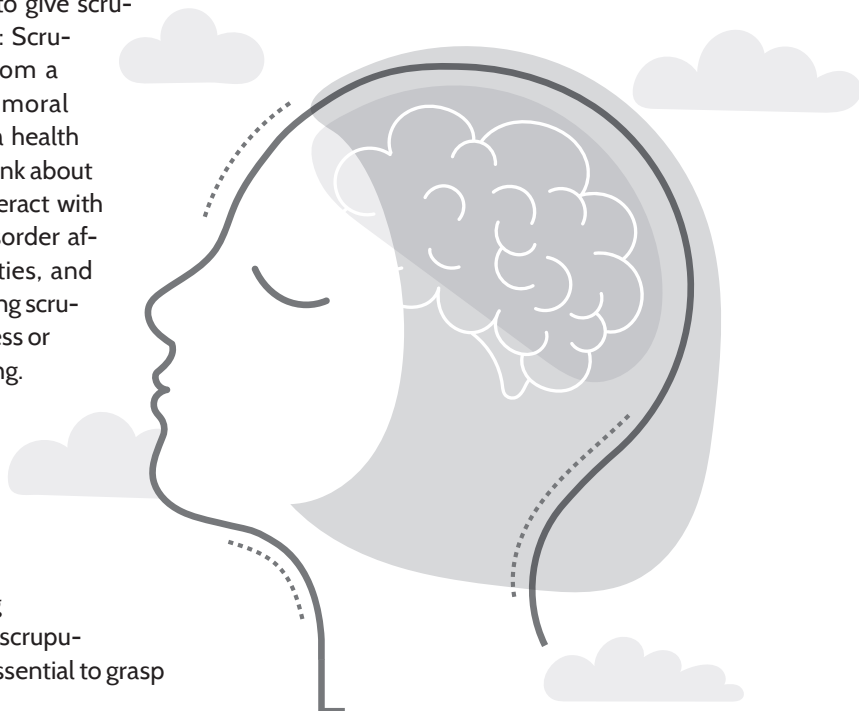
There many words and phrases that are used to explain what it means to suffer from scrupulosity. Some resemble a book title, like “the doubting disease” or “a thousand frightening fantasies.” Others are phrases that are in the scrupulosity lexicon, including “a sensitive conscience” and the experience of “constant nagging thoughts that will not go away.”

These are helpful, but I prefer to give scrupulosity a psychological definition: Scrupulosity is a mental disorder. From a psychological standpoint and a moral perspective, a mental disorder is a health problem that affects the way we think about ourselves, relate to others, and interact with the world around us. A mental disorder affects our thoughts, feelings, abilities, and behaviors. Mental disorders, including scrupulosity, can cause significant distress or impairment of personal functioning. The features of a mental disorder may persist, relapse, and remit, or they may occur once.

Defining scrupulosity as it truly is—a mental disorder—has two key benefits. The definition can free sufferers from crippling self-blame when they experience scrupulous feelings. The meaning is also essential to grasp

for people who work with sufferers, such as confessors and spiritual directors.

While spiritual components are present in the disorder—particularly in the way anxiety is experienced and described by the person who suffers from it—spiritual-only remedies are usually ineffective in managing scrupulosity. Behavioral and psychologi-



cal therapy, including therapeutic drugs, are usually more effective and have greater potential to provide significant relief and management. Unfortunately far too often, therapeutic approaches aren't used to help the sufferer because of the false belief that scrupulosity is somehow God's will.

Notice I refer to the "management" of scrupulosity and not a "cure." There may well be an ebb and a flow of intensity to the manifestation of the disorder for the sufferer, but seldom is there a complete and total remission. The disorder typically is always present, requiring consistent management in order to achieve a sense of peace and well-being. As with all mental disorders, it can't be willed or prayed away. Unless there's a miraculous intervention by the grace of God (which I don't rule out), scrupulosity must be managed. Thus, it's far better to work with God-given management gifts than it is to await a miracle.

Once we accept that scrupulosity is a mental disorder, we can try to understand how it's experienced. The vast majority of sufferers experience scrupulosity through compulsive questions about sin, mostly centered on compulsion over a specific theme, with numerous questions arising. Each question is anxious and frantic, building an explosive energy that the sufferer wrongly thinks can only be moderated by engaging in ritual behavior such as multiple confessions, repeated prayers, or other actions. The process then begins again, each time with more anxiety and fear. The cruel result is an energized manifestation of the disorder and a false promise of peace and resolution, if only temporary.

The experience is further complicated and worsened by a basic misunderstanding of what sin is and, usually, a warped concept of the nature of God. These off-kilter components make the suffering more intense. Unfortunately, a misunderstanding of sin and a warped concept about God can detour the

management of the disorder and thus interfere with the effectiveness of correct catechetical understanding and sound behavioral therapy.

Sufferers and well-meaning caregivers who take only a spiritual approach to treating scrupulosity can and often do compound the problem. For example, sufferers who are Catholic may wrongly believe that their caregiver is trying to make them sin or is not in step with Catholicism. Uninformed caregivers who don't understand that scrupulosity is not a spiritual problem but a mental disorder may give incomplete, unhelpful advice and direction.

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Caregivers and scrupulosity sufferers may not notice that a continual asking of questions is part of the disorder. After all, everyone poses questions in a spiritual journey. However, when questions, feelings, and interpretations of experiences intrude into a peaceful life and make a person feel trapped into an obsessive, compulsive examina-

tion that's unending and never satisfied, scrupulosity could well be the probable cause. People who exhibit this obsessive and compulsive behavior should seek professional help.

Indeed, a professional diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) may help sufferers and their spiritual caregivers by putting the problem in the mental health arena, thus helping ensure that the person with scrupulosity will receive attention that will help lead to greater peace. In addition, for some people, participation in an OCD support group helps manage the disorder.

And for the scrupulous person to progress, it's also crucial that his or her confessor or spiritual director understand, support, and never interfere with the directives of mental health professionals. In order to accomplish the goal of peace in the person's life, everyone must understand what scrupulosity is: a mental disorder, not a spiritual one. ✪

MARY, PRAY FOR US • JUNE 27 IS THE FEAST DAY OF OUR MOTHER OF PERPETUAL HELP

Of Mary, St. Alphonsus Liguori writes in his *Visits to the Most Blessed Sacrament*: “Those who make her known and loved by others are well on their way to heaven.”

Since 1866, the Redemptorists have been making Our Blessed Mother known, singing her praises under the title of Our Mother of Perpetual Help.

Please feel free to offer your prayer intentions to Our Mother of Perpetual Help on the enclosed form and return them in the envelope provided. ✨

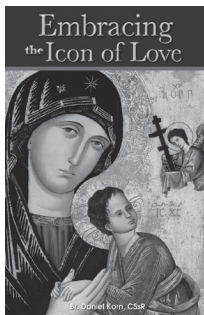


The Miraculous Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help

When we place ourselves before an icon in an attitude of prayer and reflection, we're invited into a spiritual space of divine energy. The face of Our Mother of Perpetual Help has this effect on those who pray before her. Her penetrating gaze tends to pull us into the sacred space as she invites us to delve deeply into the mystery of the living Christ.

This icon presents the mystery of Jesus' Incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection and the effects these mysteries have on us. It's about the mystery of Christ in our midst.

People with a strong devotion to Mary through this icon have had many powerful experiences, including cures and answered prayers. These events help show the icon's mystical qualities. It is through these experiences that the title “miraculous” was attached to this icon down to the present day. Its official title is the Miraculous Icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. What makes an icon “miraculous” is the veneration bestowed upon the image by the faith and devotion of the community.



Source: Adapted from *Embracing the Icon of Love*, © 2015 Br. Daniel Korn, CSSR, Liguori Publications (825651). To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

Thus the icon is more than a picture or image used for religious decoration. Rather, it not only inspires spiritual thoughts and feelings but also engages all who look upon her to a level beyond the ordinary experience of piety. It is in this space of devotion that the icon becomes the vehicle for God's presence to the one in prayer before it. For it is said about an icon that it is a place to encounter God.

The icon is an efficacious sign of a real presence because it is a sacramental. Icons become a great means of holiness because of the ritual blessing and the veneration of the image. This allows for the experience of the miraculous interventions and favors bestowed upon those who pray in the presence of an icon.

The process of unlocking the miraculous dimension of the icon is discovered through contemplative prayer. Through the prayer practice of gazing, we enable ourselves to step from our regular routine and place ourselves in a posture of silent prayer. Icons are created to give us the opportunity to enter into the space of the holy. Mary's gaze draws us into the icon, enabling us to give ourselves to the divine energy contained therein. It is in this space we encounter the miraculous experience of the icon of Our Mother of Perpetual Help. ✨

Mailbox

ONE LIGUORI DRIVE, LIGUORI, MO 63057 • NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

Q. *I can't find a confessor who understands what it means to be a scrupulous person. How am I ever going to get the help that I need? I am at my wits' end and very frustrated. Do you have any suggestions?*

A. I suggest you widen your search for a companion to help you. That help needn't come from a confessor. You need someone like a spiritual director, counselor, friend, or support group to encourage you as you take the many small steps in your daily routine to learn to manage scrupulosity. A confessor who is understanding and trained may well be an ideal choice, but sometimes we're unable to secure the ideal confessor and need to work with someone who is available. Your mental health community can suggest where to look for help. They're certainly eager to help you find the help you need.

Q. *I feel the burden of sin everywhere. Everything seems to be a sin, and I am never sure if I am in a state of grace. Even asking this question of you makes me wonder if I am guilty of the sin of despair. When will it end?*

A. The tone and content of your question suggests to me that you have perhaps moved from a spiritual struggle to a mental health issue. Life is not a burden. But if that is the way that you feel, then you need to seek help and direction. Depression is a serious illness, but thankfully there are all sorts of effective therapies that can be applied to help you feel more like yourself. Please seek the help of a medical professional.



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