



Can the Scrupulous Offend God?

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A trait that people with scrupulosity exhibit that puzzles me is their persistent and often intense fear of committing a mortal sin.

Chat with someone with the disorder or bring a group of people together who share it, and this fear will soon be a major focus of the conversation. I'm puzzled because mortal sin seems contradictory to the experience of being scrupulous.

Scrupulous people usually know the intricacies of Church doctrine and can often quote verbatim the conditions required for an action to be a mortal sin. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states in quoting St. John Paul II's apostolic exhortation on reconciliation and penance: "Mortal sin is sin whose object is grave matter and which is also committed with full knowledge and deliberate consent" (CCC 1857). It "presupposes knowledge of the sinful character of the act, of its opposition to God's law" (CCC 1859). A person who commits a mortal sin knows he is sinning and offending God.

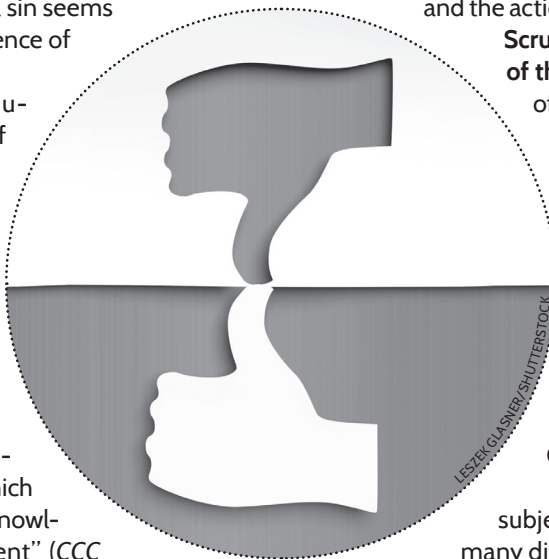
That would seem to relieve instead of scare a person with scrupulosity because those with the disorder are always concerned that their thoughts and actions offend God. Their obsession is to avoid offending God.

As a result, they engage in compulsive rituals to constantly monitor their relationship with God, always choosing the least-offensive path. So how could they ever choose to offend God by acting in "opposition to God's law"? Do you see the contradiction between the behavior of a person with scrupulosity and the actions required for a mortal sin?

Scrupulosity is the manifestation of the fear of offending God. It's often a major fear of offense.

The anxiety generated by this fear leads to ritualistic behaviors, such as a litany of unending questioning that heightens the awareness of even the possibility of a potential offense. Again, it seems impossible for a person with the disorder to purposely offend God.

I have spoken about this subject a lot and referenced it in many different ways in this newsletter, but it has not taken root among some readers. So here, in bold-faced italics, is a strong statement: ***Scrupulosity renders a person to experience, through no fault of his own, a diminished moral capacity to freely choose.*** Scrupulosity is a permanent condition that severely limits and may even eliminate the possibility of free and conscious choosing, since the disorder is so pathological.



If you accept this truth as factual—and there’s no reason not to accept it since it’s a central interpretation of the moral teaching tradition of the Church—it is impossible for a scrupulous person to commit a mortal sin. The only way for such a person to commit a mortal sin would be for him to become free of scrupulosity, thus stopping the rituals that go with the disorder (the vigilance, fear, and anxiety). Only then would he have the freedom to choose to offend God. But as long as scrupulosity is present and active in a sufferer’s life, the possibility of him freely choosing to commit a mortal sin does not exist.

When this reality sinks in and the spiritual path that supports a person with scrupulosity is engaged (more on this in next month’s newsletter), a fierce struggle will take place within the person. The first feeling experienced will be one of hope, of grace. But this feeling will soon be replaced by a question or two: *Is hope (grace) true? How can hope and grace be available to everyone but me? It obviously doesn’t apply to me since I seem to be the exception.*

Friends, remember, imagination will play an important role in the struggle that will follow. I believe a scrupulous person imagines that he somehow engages in a thought or a behavior that’s truly free from the manifestation of scrupulosity. As a result of this imagined freedom, he concludes that he can

and does sin. This faulty thinking is not true. The sufferer is not really imagining the sin but rather a state of mind that would permit sin: a mind free from the disorder of scrupulosity. An imagined state of mind is not real, and an imagined sin is not committed. Both are bogus. But the imagined scenario is how people with this disorder think. To them, the imagined is real.

To make matters worse, a scrupulous person will never give himself a break. His fears and anxieties are all-consuming and become the only emotions he trusts. Sufferers feel most like themselves when they are suffering from the disorder. To imagine any other possibility—even to accept and apply the moral and completely orthodox teaching of “diminished capacity for freedom”—becomes impossible for them. Despite the truth, they truly believe they are consistently offending God.

I urge people with scrupulosity to try to do this: When you’re most fearful and anxious about a choice or a decision you’ve made, or you fear you’ve somehow offended God, reassure yourself that the scrupulosity is at work. The fear and anxiety, although deeply felt and even painful, are not indicative of the condition of your immortal soul or descriptive of your relationship with God. The exact opposite is true. You are truly pleasing God, and you are truly living a moral and inspirational Christian life. ✨



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Navigating an Ocean of Anxiety

Technology has contributed greatly to our lives, but it's also become embedded into our schools, our workplaces, and our homes, making our family life more complicated and more open to outside influence than it once might have been. Parents can feel overwhelmed and think there's no escape. We live in an unprecedented, perplexing time that has parents stressing out as they overmanage, overschedule, or overprotect their children. Many children and their parents are swimming in an ocean of anxiety.

Parents need to see the need to slow down and take action. They must acknowledge what they can do for themselves as well. All of us need to wake up and then grow up. Waking up is about becoming conscious, which cannot happen when we're always on the go. Working two or three jobs, either as a couple or as a single parent, and raising a family, is taxing. Tired, joyless parents give children the unspoken message: "Grow up so that you, too, can eventually become a joyless and exhausted person like me." Our words have power, but our actions still speak louder. Responsible parents require respite care. It cannot

wait until after the children grow up. Many parents with school-aged children have never gone away for an overnight without their children. Toward the end of an annual marriage enrichment program, one of the wives was disappointed that the Church does so little to support marriage in any consistent and ongoing way. "I realize that if we're ever going to have our marriages supported and strengthened, it's really up to us to do it," she said. Family people need to take responsibility to see to it that marriage enrichment and family support happen in the parish either by demanding it and/or by initiating it.

Children do best when their parents are each able to take care of themselves and know how to love their children's mother or father. With divorced parents, the children do best when the parents manage to heal and forgive their former spouse and move into coparenting without pulling their children into taking sides. Once you've determined the challenges your family faces, it's easier to see what you need to add, subtract, or modify to keep your family focused on God and each other. Take quiet time to listen to how God is calling you to grow in wisdom and grace.

Conversation starters for families:

- When did I first realize my family loves me?
- What caused this realization?
- What makes me unique?
- What is a quality about our family that makes us unique?
- How does our faith/religious practice assist us?
- What is one thing I especially like about our family life? ⚙️



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Source: *Family, the Church, and the Real World*, a Redemptorist Pastoral Publication (826207), © 2015 Liguori Publications. To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

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Q. *I tend to trust “the tried and the true,” the spiritual authors and saints who lived a long time ago. I fear that the advice offered by modern thinkers is somehow lacking.*

A. Even the great St. Thomas Aquinas was dependent for his knowledge and theological conclusions on what he was able to experience and observe. Since he lived more than 700 years ago, his experiences were different from those of today. He knew nothing of the atom. He didn't know about bacteria. He had never heard of psychology. His view of the universe was limited, compared to ours. If he could have had knowledge of all of the things we know about, his teaching would have been substantially different. It is unwise to depend on teachings that are incomplete and potentially harmful. God wants us to be educated and make well-thought-out decisions that reflect our time and place.

Q. *Is “healthy shame” possible? I read somewhere that shame can be very healthy and very healing.*

A. Shame, if it is a temporary condition, can perhaps be somewhat healthy if it serves as an invitation to growth and maturity. Shame for its own sake, shame that's persistent, or shame that's inflicted on another person is not healthy, in my opinion. In both the long run and the short run, I believe we should always try to find gentle and loving explanations or interpretations of experiences. Shame can do a lot of damage.



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