



A Spiritual Path

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The words *spirituality* and *religious* are often used casually with little thought about what they mean. Some people calmly assert they're religious. Others say they're spiritual, not religious. Still others state they're both spiritual and religious. Variations of the words also are used with little or no awareness of what's being said.

Even people who are vaguely aware of what it might mean to be spiritual or religious know the words can mean different things to different people. The definitions seem to hinge on a person's relationships and his or her life experience.

Essentially, spirituality is a form of inner awakening. It's a gradual and developing sense and experience that invites an individual to accept a perspective and understanding of who he is in

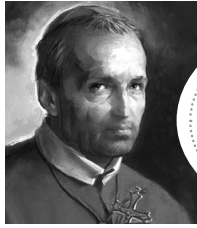
relationship to the world. As a starting point to taking on a spiritual perspective, a person must acknowledge that life does not revolve around him or her. In order to be spiritual, people—especially integrated and mature people—need to relate with other people and with the “Other.” Those are the basics of spirituality.

Religion and religiosity are different from spirituality. A mature religious person should at least have begun to be awakened spiritually and engaged in growth and development. In addition, religious people engage in practices, of which there is a wide variety. The practices are behaviors, rituals, and prayers that manifest the discipline of a particular religion. For example, attending Sunday Mass is a discipline and practice of Catholics.



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Often, religious practices are associated with a particular community of like-minded people who assume a specific identity. As a community member, a person has a relationship with both the community and the institution that the community formed and sustains. A religious practice can also become entirely centered on a lived faithfulness to the rituals and laws of the institution, sometimes to the exclusion of any relationship with the people who form the community. This is often observed when a person enjoys little or no relationship with the men and women who form the community but who insists on a perfect practice of the laws, dogmas, and rituals of the community. For this person, the institution becomes the primary relationship, and the people who form the community are nonessential. In such a case, conflict between the person and the community is unavoidable.



THE FEAST OF
ST. ALPHONSUS
LIGUORI
IS AUGUST 1.

People with scrupulosity are often very religious, but they struggle with developing a mature sense of what it means to be spiritual. Scrupulosity, in effect, blocks the integration between spirituality and religious practice. The two have trouble linking in the mind of a scrupulous person because of his or her crippling and omnipresent feelings of fear and anxiety. Since it is impossible to fully understand, fully manage, and fully control the disorder, scrupulous people often naturally take refuge in religious practices. For them, religious practices hold what they believe is the promise of certitude and perfection. Of course, this is a false promise. Sadly, the disorder convinces a scrupulous person that his fears and anxieties will become manageable when certitude and perfection are achieved. This false conviction leads to fruitless efforts to be freed from fear and anxiety through certitude and perfection.

For the scrupulous person, ordinary rituals and religious practices and discipline are dead ends. Ordinary and acceptable practices for people who don't struggle with scrupulosity are guaranteed to perpetuate fear and anxiety in those with the

disorder. As a result, people with scrupulosity get sidetracked from experiencing spiritual growth. Further, it's counterproductive for them to try to perfect any religious practice or discipline. Scrupulous people are best served by a minimal amount of religious practice. The best religious

practices for scrupulous people are more mysterious, not tightly ritualized.

Scrupulous people, healthy choices in the Roman Catholic tradition include working with a confessor and/or spiritual director, attending Sunday Mass where you receive holy Communion, receiving the sacrament of the anointing of the sick every other month during a communal celebration, silent meditation every day, and contemplative or centering prayer. Spiritual reading should be monitored and directed by a spiritual director who is aware of the scrupulous condition and struggle and who understands the intensity of the fear and anxiety that the scrupulous person experiences.

Among the major unhealthy choices for people with the disorder include an examination of conscience, frequent reception of the sacrament of reconciliation, a general confession of sins, avoidance of receiving Communion at Mass, seeking help and advice from multiple confessors and spiritual directors, reading material about spiritual perfection or scrupulosity that was published before the year 2000, and new works that refer to the so-called "classics" of spirituality. (One exception is a book from Liguori Publications, excerpted in this newsletter, *Conscience: Writings from Moral Theology by Saint Alphonsus*.)

What I have shared might set off alarm bells in you.

Scrupulous people, you may react negatively to my suggestions. You might disagree completely with my lists of the spiritual and religious practices that are helpful and essential and those that are not. But based on thirty years of continuous ministry within the scrupulous community, I insist that what I have shared here is a helpful spiritual path for people with scrupulosity. If you have the disorder, I urge you to consider the path, pray over it, and discuss it with your confessor/spiritual director. ✨

The Apostolic Priority of Alphonsus Liguori: Eradication of Scrupulosity

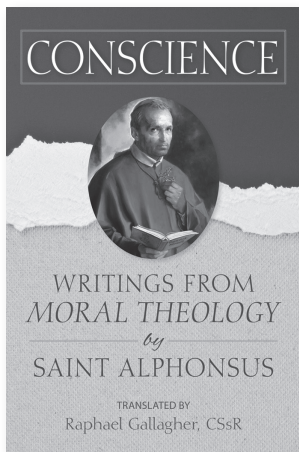
At the level of pastoral ministry in St. Alphonsus Liguori's time, the effects of Jansenism in theology, rigorous morality in preaching, and sacramental practice left a substantial legacy of guilt-induced scrupulosity. Alphonsus, as a missionary, considered its eradication to be an apostolic priority. At the level of personal character, there is evidence that Alphonsus was bothered by repeated bouts of scrupulosity.

By presenting conscience as the entry point for all of moral theology, Alphonsus chooses to focus on the immediate and practical judgment of the act of conscience. Reason (*ratio*) is the consistent characteristic of such judgments. His four signs of scrupulosity relate to the lack of reasonable judgment in practice. Scrupulosity is an illness. Alphonsus focuses on how this illness affects one's judgment in moral and spiritual matters. Scrupulosity is not the preserve of religious people. The sickness of scruples...is an inability to act freely and prudently. Psychological and psychiatric studies on scruples will use terminology consistent with their disciplines. If the illness is considered from a moral and religious standpoint, the signs of scrupulosity given by Alphonsus can still be recognized.

Alphonsus, considering scruples as the incapacity to reason sensibly, emphasizes authorities who can be trusted. Did Alphonsus keep a list of the quotations and the practical advice near at hand for his own use? Quite likely. The quotations are from spiritual masters and experienced pastors. His emphasis on obedience to a director/confessor and his distinctions between higher and lower parts of the soul are from a different theological age. It would not be a contemporary method of clarification. For Alphonsus, one needs a level of certainty in moral decisions. The scrupulous person, by himself, cannot reach that certainty. Relying on the authority of a confessor/director can be, within the logic of Alphonsus, a reasonable choice to make.

It is not surprising that Alphonsus gives priority to the loss of eternal salvation as the greatest predicament for scrupulous people. We should note, however, his insistence that scruples can lead to mental imbalance, physical illness, depression, and suicide. The fact that these are not put at the same level as loss of salvation hardly lessens their importance in the practical support of a scrupulous person.

Alphonsus' pastoral spirit in dealing with the complexity of scruples could be recovered, with benefit, by pastoral ministers. ✨



Excerpted from *Conscience: Writings from Moral Theology* by Saint Alphonsus, translated and with commentary by Fr. Raphael Gallagher, CSsR, © 2019 Liguori Publications (828140).

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Q. *If you had to choose just one piece of advice for a scrupulous person, what would that advice be? I think I know what it will be, but I just want to see what you might say.*

A. If my limit was stating just one truth with a scrupulous person, it might not be what you expect. Here it is: strive to learn how to recognize your fear triggers and manage your scrupulosity. You cannot be cured of scrupulosity. You can, however, learn to manage the disorder and achieve a palatable and life-giving freedom from the fear and anxiety that the disorder causes. Let go of the impossible and embrace the possible.



ANNOUNCING!

Liguori Publications will begin monthly email delivery of the *Scrupulous Anonymous* newsletter with the January 2020 issue. At that time, our SA print newsletter will be mailed to subscribers in the US and Canada only.

To subscribe, free of charge, please visit scrupulousanonymous.org/email-newsletter.

To download the latest edition of the newsletter, visit scrupulousanonymous.org.

Q. *I think you should apologize to me and to all of the readers of your newsletter for the constant errors you champion in these pages. You are an unreliable guide, and the advice you offer is not consistent with the teaching of the Church.*

A. My advice is the best pastoral and orthodox advice available for the scrupulous. I never offer advice in this publication without much prayer and thought beforehand. I always try to choose subject matter that is representative of the mail I receive. Each topic is as current as possible in the hope that it will benefit our readers. I understand that some readers, such as yourself, will be disappointed and distressed because I contradict and challenge your belief system. You know your own system, and I don't pretend to be useful or acceptable. But if you want helpful pastoral advice that is representative of the teaching of the Church, this newsletter faithfully presents that reality.



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