



Finding Common Ground

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In ministering to scrupulous men and women for decades, I've learned it's almost impossible for me to completely understand the full reality of what an individual is experiencing. It's not that I don't understand how crippling fear and anxiety can be. I'm all too familiar with the consequences of fear and anxiety. But I'm unable to fully understand the unique experience of another. Although each person's experience of scrupulosity shares some common elements with the experiences of others, the uniqueness is more prominent than the commonality.

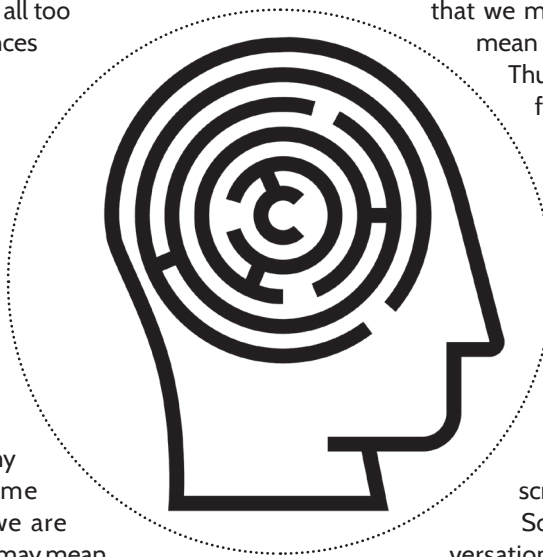
In talking with a person who has scrupulosity on any topic, we can use the same words to describe what we are experiencing, but the words may mean different things to each person. For instance, I might say I feel fearful, and the other person may say he's also scared, but the depth of our fear sets us apart. On a scale of one to ten, I might give my feelings a routine three or four while my friend's fear is a profound seven. Neither of us can fully grasp the depths of the feeling of the other, perhaps making a useful conversation difficult and frustrating.

This unknowable uniqueness can also get in our way when other subjects are discussed. For example, when I'm discussing mortal sin and venial sin or the minimum requirement for Catholic living with someone with scrupulosity, I become aware that we may use the same words but mean something entirely different.

Thus a conversation can become fraught with false starts and incomplete results because each person's experience is unique. In such a conversation, no one is trying to hide or evade. The roadblocks show up simply because of each person's experience, religious formation, and the complexities resulting from the fear and anxiety that accompany scrupulosity.

So it would seem that any conversation that attempts to be useful and pastorally helpful is almost impossible, but that's not the case, as long as the people who are interacting agree on a common position.

If you have scrupulosity and talk with someone about religious ideas, I suggest you rely on traditional, Catholic, and orthodox teaching as your points of commonality, your common ground. If you and the person you're with concur, you'll have a good talk.



Official Church teaching is always a good starting point for discussions among Catholics about religious ideas. While the scrupulous condition may interfere with the helpfulness of any discussion, if you keep returning to your common ground of official Church teaching, you'll at least have a secure base.

Don't expect a panacea, because even dogma and the orthodox tradition are subject to interpretation. Take the works of Thomas Aquinas and Alphonsus Liguori. Both men are saints and were faithful theologians. The works of both accurately reflect orthodox and traditional Catholic teaching. Still, there are nuances in their teachings that become clear in the pastoral applications of their teachings. Why? Like you and me, Sts. Thomas and Alphonsus were unique. When their teachings clash, we can celebrate rather than feel frustrated because each saint brought unique manifestations of the Spirit of God to God's table. Trust that their writings are good.

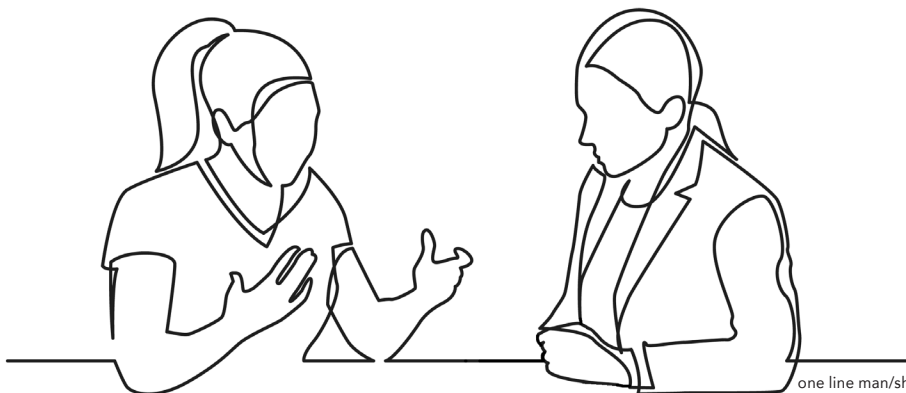
What's the solution to the conundrum caused by clashing theological and spiritual teachings? I believe there are at least two points where agreement seems to be essential in order to proceed. First, remove the scrupulous condition and perspective from the interpretation of the teaching. Second, opt in favor of the most contemporary pastoral application. Let me explain.

When a scrupulous person interprets a directive or practice, the teaching will always be understood from the perspective, the fear, and the anxiety that is the experience of scrupulosity. The loudest "voice" will be the scrupulosity, not the teaching. Thus it's important

to accept the interpretation of the teaching from the perspective of someone who does not suffer from the disorder. That's a primary reason that the saints have traditionally insisted that scrupulous people follow the direction of a confessor.

Opting for the most contemporary pastoral application is also important. Generally, Church teaching and teachers have progressed in helpful ways over the years, so a modern perspective of Catholic teaching can help the people in the pew, including those with scrupulosity. All of us *can* learn. We *can* learn from our mistakes. We *can* be open to new perspectives. We *can* acknowledge that new information suggests new understanding.

Over my many years in pastoral counseling people with scrupulosity, I've learned that because there is more uniqueness than commonality within the lived experience of the scrupulous condition, effective management of the disorder requires extra attention and discipline. I encourage you to make every effort to achieve at least a shared and common understanding of whatever subject you're discussing. It's counterproductive to assume that we understand what we're talking about with each other without first taking the time to understand the interpretation and the context of the topic. Failing to seek to understand and then be understood leads to more frustration and an increase in anxiety. Seeking common ground is good overall advice, but it's particularly important for pastoral counseling and therapy sessions. I pray that we use this advice so we have a better chance of experiencing the grace of God. ✨



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Stop Worrying! Open Your Bible and Praise God!

One of life's greatest challenges is maintaining a sense of composure when faced with trials and tribulations. Being a Christian should make this easier, but we often get so overwhelmed that this advantage is nullified. To achieve a sense of peace during trials, we must stay close to the Lord. While we may be able to get by on our own temporarily, we'll eventually reach our breaking point.

When I was a college student, I joined a Catholic prayer group. Led by two priests, this large group comprised laypeople of various ages. The common characteristic of those involved was a strong belief in God's providence. No matter what tragedy or difficulty these people were faced with, the response was the same. Death, unemployment, illness, or any other imaginable problem all brought about the response: "Praise God!"

While I desperately wanted to share in their practice of giving thanks in all circumstances, part of me felt that they were out of touch with reality.

As I've grown closer to the Lord, I realize that the folks in the prayer group were completely correct. God doesn't want us to worry and can help us to trust in all circumstances. How is this possible? Rather than consult the experts of the world, start by opening the Bible. Here's a sample passage:

***"[Jesus] said to [his] disciples,
Therefore I tell you, do not worry
about your life and what you will eat,
or about your body and what you will wear."
Luke 12:22***

Worry is useless. So why do we spend so much time doing something useless? The reason is most likely twofold: our temperament and underestimating God's providence.



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Some people, like yours truly, are hard-wired to worry. It's almost instinctive that as soon as problems arise, worry kicks in.

In spite of this propensity, we can learn to modify our behavior and use our energy productively. What are some constructive activities we can undertake when faced with problems? Prayer, reading the Bible, and receiving the sacraments will produce positive results in our lives.

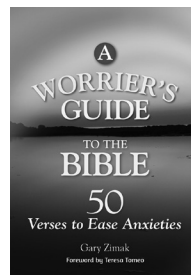
Suppose, for instance, that you lost your job today. I guarantee that if you read Luke 12:22 several times throughout the days that follow you will feel some sense of peace. You might

have to read it lots of times for a few days before the peace sets in, but the feeling will eventually arrive and take hold.

Why?

Because the Lord speaks directly to you through the Bible. Scripture passages really do have a positive effect.

In addition, after you pray and act on your prayers in a constructive way by seeking employment that you want, the result could be a new, better job. I can guarantee that worrying won't yield a happy outcome. Remember, never underestimate God. ✨



Adapted from *A Worrier's Guide to the Bible: 50 Verses to Ease Anxieties* by Gary Zimak, foreword by Teresa Tomeo. © 2012 Liguori Publications (821639). To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

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Q. *I feel like I am offending God when I have unruly thoughts or strong desires. I know such thoughts and desires are not sins, but I want to be freed from these kinds of distractions.*

A. Do you want to know what offends God? I assure you it is not unruly thoughts or strong desires. Put your experience in context. What about war? What about the physical, psychological, and spiritual manifestations of abuse? How about ignoring the needs of people you know? Read the Old Testament prophets and you'll get a better sense of what offends God. Unfortunately, things have not changed much over the centuries. If you put your life in perspective, you have a better chance of freeing yourself from the distractions that bother you.

Q. *When I'm watching television I sometimes encounter a program that is unsettling or I come across subject matter that is contrary to the teaching of the Church. If I continue to watch television even though I know this might happen, have I sinned?*

A. A moral Christian life includes the possibility of encountering imagined situations—including media programming where the subject matter may not reflect the teaching of the Church—as well as encounters with real people and real experiences. The Christian life isn't isolated and protected. It's a life that's lived reflecting and witnessing to gospel values when we come across the real and the imagined. Life is not about pretending. It is about living.



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