



Tied Up in Knots

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

I receive frequent commentary about the SA newsletter from many readers. Most find it a helpful publication. There is, however, one commentator who routinely responds negatively to my pastoral direction. He also occasionally offers an example of how scrupulosity manifests. This month I'm sharing a letter from him that relates a struggle many of our readers share:

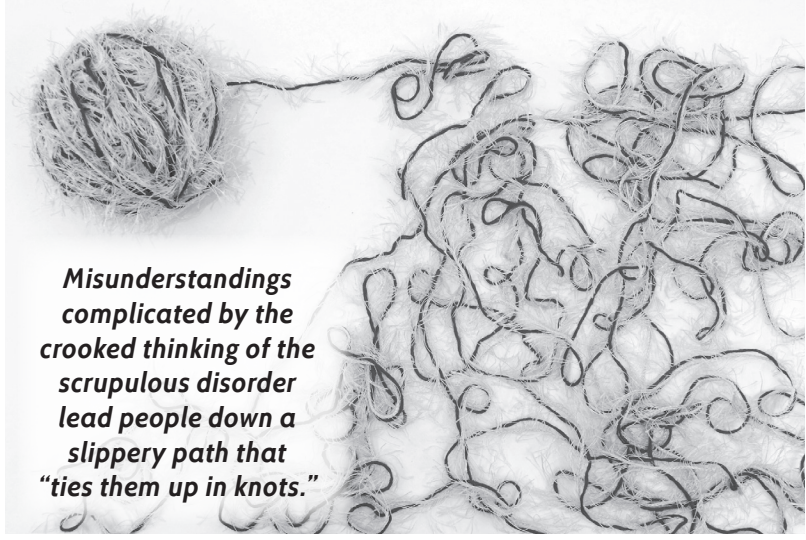
If I confess my sins to a priest, I have to promise to God that I don't intend to sin ever (ever!) again. And since I find myself incapable or unwilling to say that, I have been and am delaying (for years) going to confession. Thus I also don't go to Sunday Mass because it's pointless for me. I'm now seeking a solution to my lack of determination and single-mindedness. Because it has to be a lifelong one.

This statement is a valuable example of one of the results of "crooked thinking" that's so often part of the experience of scrupulosity. Here we find three issues, which I will address in an effort to help our community.

First, the writer misrepresents and misunderstands the devotional prayer prayed by the penitent during con-

fession. Second, he misunderstands who can keep promises. And third, our friend reveals the slippery path that often results from such misunderstandings, which are complicated by fear and anxiety, and lead to an all-or-nothing viewpoint. Permit me to comment on each component.

"There are a variety of different Acts of Contrition suggested in the rite of penance," according to the Vatican News website. The traditional prayer, an alternate, and other versions of contrition prayers used during confession all state the penitent's *intention* to avoid sin. Penitents can't promise to never sin. They are required to confess their sins as they understand



Misunderstandings complicated by the crooked thinking of the scrupulous disorder lead people down a slippery path that "ties them up in knots."



Mary, Pray for Us

*In this season
of Thanksgiving,
may we
remember the
needs of others.
Offer your
intentions to
Our Mother of*

*Perpetual Help on the enclosed form and
return in the envelope provided.*

them and express sorrow. The priest is then required to offer the prayer of sacramental absolution. The forgiveness of the sacrament is dependent on the mercy of God. The grace of the sacrament is received to help us try to live a life more reflective of the kingdom of God. Our Lord wants us to do our best to live the best life we can. But God knows no one can ever promise not to sin.

Of course, people make promises that bind them, in a canonical sense, to a way of living. Such promises include the vows the clergy make. However, for promises to be binding, people must be fully aware of the ramifications of their promises and capable of fulfilling them. As a result of the disorder, people with scrupulosity aren't capable of fulfilling a canonical promise to avoid sin. Diminished capacity, which limits freedom, makes this kind of promise null and void, despite the best of intentions. Thus, even if the devotional prayer in confession were intended to be a canonical obligation—which it is not—such an obligation could not be assumed by a scrupulous person. I hope my thoughts on the letter writer's first two points will reveal the process that's at work and help scrupulosity sufferers. His two points bring us to our third point of consideration.

Misunderstandings complicated by the crooked thinking of the scrupulous disorder lead people down

a slippery path that "ties them up in knots." Trapped by their misunderstandings and fed by fear and anxiety, they can only adopt an all-or-nothing viewpoint. This perception is made all the more confining and abusive when the person assumes exaggerated responsibility for the predicament and blames it on their supposed lack of determination and single-mindedness. Mentally, they beat themselves up.

I have shared this letter and my short answers in the hope that some readers might recognize the dynamic that is at work and also recognize the harm that this kind of crooked thinking leads to.



Does any path lead to spiritual freedom for the scrupulous? Yes, but as I have mentioned many times in this newsletter, it is a journey that fosters management of the disorder, not necessarily a cure. The path does not begin with questions, research, self-discipline, and more obligations. If that were the way to spiritual freedom, every scrupulous person could be freed from the disorder! No, the path requires acknowledgment and acceptance of the disorder, as well as daily growth in understanding the pathological consequences of it that are manifested in each person. Once a person accepts that he suffers from the condition of scrupulosity and takes the necessary steps to learn how the disorder is manifested in his life, he can then choose—with the help of a confessor and the medical profession—the best therapeutic regimen.

My dear friends with scrupulosity, some spiritual practices can help you manage the disorder. Certain therapeutic disciplines can sharpen your management skills. And there are particular medicines that have proven to be extremely helpful. Each of these components can help you control the disorder of scrupulosity. But don't do the treatment by yourself. Spiritual confessors and medical professionals are essential in helping you "untie the knots" and experience the freedom of a child of God, which you most certainly are. ✨

Reconciliation Beyond the Grave

Is it possible to reconcile with someone after he or she has died? This question applies to situations where there's been some estrangement or conflict at the time of death, especially when that death was sudden or unexpected. This is not uncommon, and those left behind are often burdened with feelings of remorse, guilt, and regret.

But in our life of faith, death should never be the final word. Jesus has achieved perfect reconciliation. That reconciliation "is finished" on the cross (John 19:30). The reconciliation is between God and us and between one another. Yet how do we realize it, or experience it, when there was a relationship breakdown at the time of someone's death?

The first thing we recommend is to find reconciliation in and through the Mass. It's in the Eucharist that we experience most fully and sacramentally the communion of saints—the communion and ongoing fellowship that exists between the living and the "living dead"—those who have died to this world but are living already in the world to come. Practically, it's helpful to have a Mass offered for the deceased person and to ask one another forgiveness for past hurts and conflicts during the Mass.

An "Emmaus" Reconciliation Meditation

On a more personal, spiritual, and psychological level, the following meditation steps may help. It's based on the story of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). For them, all felt lost with Jesus' death. But an extraordinary encounter with Jesus takes place, renewing their faith and hope.

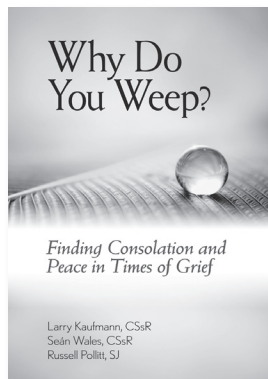
In the meditation, be alone. Invoke the wisdom and light of the Holy Spirit. Invite quiet into your heart and spirit. Imagine the Emmaus road through the Judean countryside where the two disciples walked, conversing. They are depressed, discouraged, dejected.

Now imagine that you are one of those two disciples. The other person with you is the deceased person whom you have hurt or who has hurt you. Have an imaginary conversation in which you speak honestly with the other about what had happened, how you each feel. Allow yourself to feel the sad and/or angry feelings of the memory. Don't shy away from the pain. In your imaginary conversation, make sure you give "each other" equal time to speak. If you knew the other person well, you should have a good idea what he or she would say.

Then Jesus comes along and joins you in your walk. He asks you: "What are you discussing as you walk along?" Tell him honestly. Allow Jesus to speak to the situation.

Now you reach an intersection on the road. Jesus tells you he is taking the other person along with him, but that you must remain behind for now, going your own way. Jesus embraces you. The other person embraces you. Watch them walk off and fade into the distance.

Bring your meditation dialogue to Mass or to a time of adoration before the Blessed Sacrament. You may also wish to arrange to have a Mass intention offered for the deceased person. Remember, forgiveness heals. ✪



Adapted from *Why Do You Weep? Finding Consolation and Peace in Times of Grief* © 2012 Larry Kaufmann, CSsR; Sean Wales, CSsR; and Russell Pollitt, SJ (Liguori Publications, 820779).

Mailbox

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Q. *At this time of year my mailbox is filled with appeals from many different charities. Some include gifts that I did not order and do not want. Do I have an obligation to send a donation to reimburse the charity for their gift? Can I use what they have sent me even if I do not send a donation?*

A. Charitable fund-raising is particularly effective during the year-end holidays. That is why you receive so many appeals. You have no obligation to respond to any solicitation. If a gift is enclosed you may use it freely, since it was unsolicited, or you may dispose of it without any other thought. The charities count these gifts as premiums and fully understand that only a small percentage will result in a donation to their cause.

Q. *There are many jokes about the obnoxious family member who attends the festive dinner and makes everyone uncomfortable. One of my uncles is representative of this stereotype. Do I nonetheless have an obligation to invite him to dinner, even though I fear he will make everyone uncomfortable?*

A. There is no Christian or moral obligation to enable bad behavior. Providing a platform for obnoxious behavior is not a virtue. If the person is not willing or unable to join in the festivities without causing a scene, you and your family have no obligation to include him. Perhaps after he is excluded a couple of times he might reexamine himself and make the necessary changes.



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