

Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

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Scrupulous Anonymous
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When I answer questions from readers of this newsletter, I often recall a quotation from James Weldon Johnson's poem, "The Prodigal Son," which begins:

*Young man—
Young man—
Your arm's too short to box with God.*

Very often, readers' letters reflect a struggle. Their heartfelt questions may seem to signal a battle with sin, but I believe the real struggle for people with scrupulosity is not so much with sin but with God, or at least the scrupulous person's unhealthy image of God. The fight becomes a mismatched "boxing match" that is "won" by their false, negative image of God.

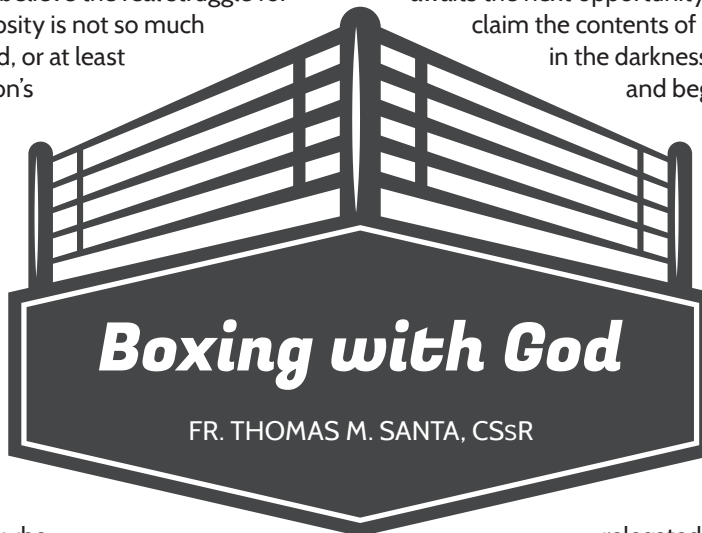
The dominant image of the deity among the scrupulous is a god of vengeance; a god who always demands perfection; a god who never celebrates and barely tolerates the human condition. This god lurks behind every thought, desire, feeling, and emotion, waiting to pounce and pronounce condemnation upon the "sinner." The scrupulous person thinks this god is tireless, ruthless, and gives people no room for error.

The god that scrupulous people imagine is a god who allows no hesitation, doubt, or anything less than an immediate response that must be infinitesimal so as not to risk the accusation that it was entertained or dwelt upon in any manner. Any other response sets the sin meter in place: In the mind of the scrupulous, the only option is determining whether the "sin" is venial, serious, or mortal.

This imagined god keeps a running catalog of failure and of times he has been disappointed. He awaits the next opportunity to reset the meter, claim the contents of the catalog, dump it in the darkness of the confessional, and begin the whole process all over again.

Some men and women who suffer with the scrupulous disorder complicate their suffering even more by applying to their lives the interpretations of a theology that has long been

relegated to the waste bin of history, where we find pious utterances of saints who lived in a different time and place and whose experiences no longer apply. The words of our saintly ancestors might be the same—and even the tone and the feeling expressed might be recognizable—but any other similarity or usefulness is simply not appropriate.



This misguided thinking leads to a “boxing match” with God. The real God was revealed by Jesus as a loving Father who desires to forgive and love, tenderly calming the tortured soul. But scrupulous sufferers sadly slap away the hand of God. They believe they don’t deserve the love of this loving God. All the while, the Triune Father, Son, and Holy Spirit strain to embrace, to accept, and to make their children whole again. God always loves and forgives. But we have to believe in and accept his compassion and mercy.

The power of the scrupulous disorder to stir up the mix and to hopelessly cloud the picture is ever present. Sin is not at work here, my friends. Sickness is. The free will of a scrupulous person has been compromised, creating perceptions and understandings of reality that are totally incorrect and severely misplaced. The scrupulous person incorrectly believes his or her own ability to be good is impossible. Nothing is further from the truth.

Is there any way to throw in the towel and stop this fight? There is, but ending the battle requires practiced courage. It demands enough trust to let down your guard, refuse to fight in the first place, and trust that there is no real competition. There is no need to fight, to struggle, to protect, to “put up your dukes” for any disaster you can imagine. Life is not to be endured, an unending race for a finish line that never comes.

Instead, life is the gift of human experience, the gift of being a fully flawed human being, a person who is loved by God. We never need to “earn” it. God’s love does, however, need to be accepted as gift.

As we accept this divine present, we must

remember that the scrupulous disorder cannot be dismissed or ignored, but it can be managed. One can learn the necessary skills that enable a more positive response to the emotional and spiritual triggers the disorder produces.

The essential first step to ending the constant boxing match with God is to refuse to “enter the ring.” Once you “step over the ropes,” fighting becomes irresistible. So stay away. Resist all the tricks the disorder uses to entice you to engage in the hopeless battle. These tricks include believing you can research yourself out of dilemmas and questions. God does not want you to reach for the false hope of clarity and certitude for any given question. Just stop. You have totally natural emotional feelings and human behavior that you misinterpret as sinful. They are not. There is no need to find an answer, because there is none.

Begin the new year of grace with the resolve to try and take one positive step each day. It is impossible to achieve the ability to manage the disorder in a

flash. The struggle is real, but success builds upon success. Confidence is increased every time a feeling of hopelessness is replaced, even for a short period of time, with a sense of progress. Use the many aids that are available to you, which include this newsletter. You are not alone in the struggle. Fill your efforts with hope. ✨

Thomas M. Santa, CSsR, longtime director of the *Scrupulous Anonymous* newsletter, has more than twenty years of experience ministering to people with scrupulosity. He offers retreats for people with the disorder and workshops on it for pastoral ministers and professional therapists.



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How Can I Tolerate Sinfulness in the Church?

The suffering brought about by the sins in the Church has, for many, become an immense suffering, which is often more oppressive than the suffering caused by the sins of the world. How can we bring this suffering to an end? Faith in Jesus Christ permits us to look to the future with unshakable trust. Faith teaches us that the word of Christ must be regarded as a true prophecy, which states: “The gates of the netherworld shall not prevail against [my church]” (Matthew 16:18).

Righteous anger can be an effective means of reacting against defects in the Church, provided important restrictions are observed. If it is not born out of painful interior suffering in and for the Church, it can easily turn into sin (see Ephesians 4:26–27). From anger there can arise rash behavior, malice, cynicism, underhanded criticism, and finally division.

Fraternal admonition is a service, a seeking help for someone who has failed and has transgressed against God and the Church. It differs from the current widespread practice of a destructive criticism. It desires to assist someone whom it sees in error, so as to recognize and do what is right.

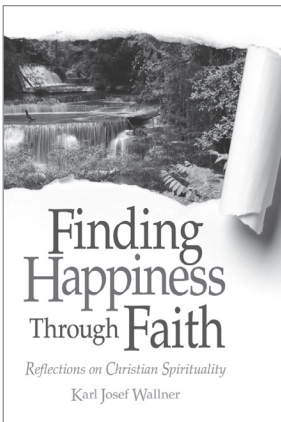
Our problem today is that many people suffer *in* the Church, but only a few are prepared to suffer *for* the Church. The redemptive value of suffering is one of the greatest mysteries of Christianity. A person must be called by God to be an expiatory sacrifice.

All saints have experienced—through the Church—persecution, defamation, and humiliation. On

the other hand, the Church is also the infrastructure, the means for holiness. Genuine, personal holiness only exists on the foundation of the Church. We will be holy in and through the Church or we will not be holy at all.

The internal disputes of the Church impede and distract us from what is essential. The Church has a mission outward, which the Lord gave to it as his testament: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19). Alongside this has already grown up a post-Christian generation for whom internal Church affairs are all equal, while they are ignorant of the more substantial subjects: God, Christ, love, sacrifice, prayer, adoration, eternal life, and other topics of substance.

Joy is my last and most appealing recommendation. We present our Christianity, our Church, as if it were not a source of joy but one of ill humor and frustration. People would find it attractive if we were to prove to them through our fire and radiance that to be a Catholic with all one’s heart brings happiness. In the midst of all the frustration it is, of course, not easy to preserve joy. However, a joyful disposition is not a moral duty but a grace and therefore a gift of the Holy Spirit. ✨



Adapted from *Finding Happiness through Faith: Reflections on Christian Spirituality* by Karl Josef Wallner, copyright 2013 (Liguori Publications, 824128). To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

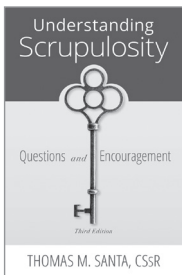
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Q. *I am tormented by past sins. For a while I seem to do OK, and then suddenly something sets me off and the torment returns. Am I doing something wrong? This up and down and back and forth is driving me to distraction.*

A. You are not doing anything wrong. What you are describing is the ebb and flow of the scrupulous disorder, and in your experience a successful path for the disorder to express itself is in your past and memory. This is not unusual for people as they age. A successful management skill is to resist the past, dwell less on the future, and try to anchor yourself in the present. For example, receive holy Communion and thank God for his sacramental gift and grace.

Q. *How old and sick do I have to be in order to excuse myself from Sunday Mass? I do all right during the summer months, but the ice and snow of winter make it difficult for me. I feel like the weather should not be an excuse.*

A. It is not an excuse, it is rather a description of reality. If you have a reason to be wary of the ice and the snow—risking a serious fall, for example, which would impact your long term well-being—is a good reason to stay home. You are not required to put yourself at risk in order to fulfill a spiritual discipline. That is not the intention of the law.



Understanding Scrupulosity: Questions and Encouragement, Third Edition
By Thomas M. Santa, CSSR

Based on a half-century of questions and answers published in the *Scrupulous Anonymous* newsletter, *Understanding Scrupulosity: Questions and Encouragement* addresses concerns related to sin, thoughts, dreams, fantasies, and sexuality, as well as confession, self-worth, prayer, and God's grace.

This third edition of *Understanding Scrupulosity* includes new chapters on identifying and understanding behaviors associated with scrupulosity. And the book explains the medical breakthroughs of the past decade on how to treat it.

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