



Is Scrupulosity Catholic?

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A persistent question posed to me about scrupulosity is whether it is a “Catholic” or “religious” disorder. While millions suffer with some form of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and scrupulosity is a manifestation of OCD, the number of people identified as religiously scrupulous is small when compared to all OCD sufferers.

One of the best guesses I have seen is that less than 200,000 people in the United States suffer with scrupulosity.

Basing our opinion primarily on anecdotal evidence, previous directors of this newsletter and I have traditionally said scrupulosity is not a Catholic or religious disorder. However, in this edition of *Scrupulous Anonymous*, I am going to revise my opinion and offer a different answer to the question, “Is scrupulosity a Catholic problem?”

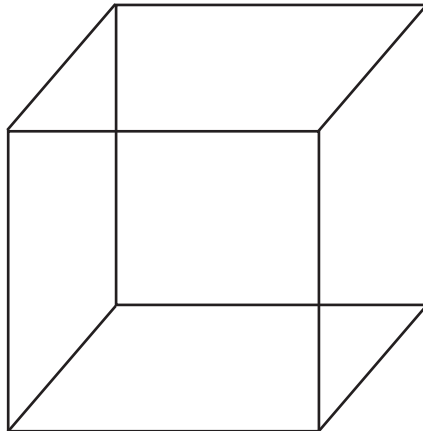
After many years of ministering to Catholic sufferers of scrupulosity, I have come to believe that—at least in the manner in which it is suffered by Catholics—scrupulosity *is* a “Catholic” problem. Of course, people of all religions or no religion

experience the scrupulous disorder, but the way a Catholic speaks about the disorder and wrestles with it *is* uniquely Catholic.

Catholics who suffer with scrupulosity routinely use the word *sin* to describe their scrupulous thoughts and feelings. They interpret their struggle within the larger context of the highly developed theology of sin that is part of the Roman Catholic tradition and practice. People who are not Catholic and who wrestle with the same feelings and behaviors as their Catholic brothers and sisters do not use the word *sin* to describe their struggle. They typically choose other words to describe their experiences.

Because Catholics with scrupulosity use the same language that is used to describe sin, their personal struggle can be said to be a Catholic problem of scrupulosity.

They unknowingly place what is primarily a behavioral issue—a mental struggle or disorder—into a theological context. They essentially take a serious disorder and complicate it even more with the language they use to describe what they feel and experience. Because they place their



struggle within the context of theology, scrupulosity becomes more than just a mental struggle. It becomes a spiritual struggle. This unfortunate theological context complicates and lessens the possibility of finding relief and the ability to manage the disorder.

This is highly unfortunate. Scrupulosity ravages a person's ability to navigate within life's "gray areas." When this inability crashes into a theological and systematic understanding of sin and the human condition, which prides itself on the ability to eliminate the gray and produce only clarity and certitude, disaster is the unavoidable result. The scrupulous person is left dangling in the terrifying in-between of the gray and the black and white. The result is an overwhelming feeling of doom, gloom, and abandonment.

This result is not intended by the theological systematic structure, but disaster is almost guaranteed when a person with scrupulosity is facing more "gray" than "black and white." The gray of life is left to the moral theologian to wrestle with. Often the systematic theologians go their merry way working the scholastic system, which never seems to exhaust either questions or answers. The Catholic person who struggles with scrupulosity does not choose to enter the theological arena, but he or she goes there anyway as a consequence of being Catholic.

Catholicity is laser-focused on sin, salvation, and redemption. From the moment children reach the "age of reason," they are instructed to learn how to confess their sins, to admit their guilt, and to convert from their weakness and failures. Often guilt, bad behavior, and the everyday struggle to learn how to become a human being produces feelings and emotions as part of the learning and growing process. Scrupulosity feeds on feelings and emotions, routinely equating a strongly felt feeling with supposed sin. Through catechetics, sermons, and every other possible means of communication,

the meaning, matter, and form of sin is explained. With such an emphasis on sin, which is often difficult to navigate for a person with *no* scrupulous tendencies, it is no wonder that the person *with* the scrupulous disorder routinely discovers himself gravitating toward this highly developed system "to explain what must be wrong with me."

Readers who do not suffer with scrupulosity may find themselves becoming defensive at this point in this article. I understand the defensive posture, but remember that I am speaking only about the process that occurs with a person who has the scrupulous *disorder*. I am not suggesting that the Catholic system of sin and moral theology produces people with scrupulosity. Rather, the system unintentionally supports the development of scrupulosity.

I offer pastoral and anecdotal evidence to support my understanding of what occurs and why I have made this change in my understanding of the question, "Is scrupulosity a Catholic problem?"

Catholics with scrupulosity have sent me volumes of theological content, Church documentation, the witness of the saints and more, all to convince me of my pastoral errors. Sadly, their scrupulosity continues to ravage within them, and peace eludes them.

Counselors who try to persuade the scrupulous that their feelings are only feelings and not sins often are accused by their clients of "trying to make me sin and lose my faith."

In partial response to this uniquely Catholic conundrum and to offer pastoral guidance, I suggest to those with scrupulosity to use *feeling* instead of *sin* to describe their experiences. While not a complete answer, this is a helpful pastoral response.

In short, Catholics must replace *sin* with *feeling* in describing this disorder so that the emotional and behavioral struggle of scrupulosity is not worsened by making it a spiritual struggle, too. Scrupulosity should never be defined as a spiritual problem. ✨

For Catholics with scrupulosity, the disorder becomes a spiritual struggle.

Saint Joseph the Worker

The Greek word for Joseph's profession is *tekton*—a “worker of hard materials.” So it's likely that Joseph worked with more than just wood and probably worked with heavy wood, stone, and even metal. In his workshop, he would make furniture, doors, windows, and other necessities for local townspeople. Outside his shop, Joseph might have repaired a plow or wagon wheel, or laid the foundation for a house.

Not only did Joseph's work give him the means for supporting his family, but it also became part of Jesus' education. So much so, in fact, that Jesus learned to work with his hands in the same profession and became known as “the carpenter” (Mark 6:3). Jesus actively chose to be known in this way, linking his social position and earthly identity with Joseph and his work.

Jesus learned his profession and livelihood from Joseph for thirty years. “The one who, *while being God, became like us in all things* (see Hebrews 2:17; Philippians 2:5–8) devoted most of the years of his life on earth to *manual work* at the carpenter's bench” (*Laborem Exercens*, 6).

While all popes in recent times have consistently presented Joseph as the model of workers and laborers, Pope Pius XII instituted this liturgical feast on May 1, 1955. He said: “By family ties, daily communion, spiritual harmony, and divine grace, Joseph, of David's line, was more closely bonded to Jesus, than was any other man, and yet he was a humble worker.”

We are also called to use our God-given skills and virtues to serve Christ in our home, the Church, and the world. This is the unique role God has prepared for us to play in the story of salvation. This is our life's work. We can think of these skills and virtues as “tools” for completing our mission.

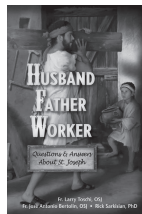
Pope John Paul II observed that “work was the daily expression of love in the life of the Family of Nazareth” (*Redemptoris Custos*, 22). This gives the phrase “labor of love” a whole new meaning, as our jobs provide a way for us to participate in the work of creation and redemption as we seek to answer



God's call. Joseph's work enabled him to fully participate in God's plan. Our work can help us do the same.

Do you see your abilities as ways of honoring God and giving him credit for your achievements? Do you see work as an expression of love for God and others? Without that perspective, it's easy to see work as nothing more than a means of financial reward—an incomplete and shallow definition indeed.

As a patron of workers, Joseph helps those who are out of work, those deciding on an educational or career path, and those in established occupations. Where there's work to be done, Joseph will protect, equip, and guide us in all our needs. Go to him. ✨



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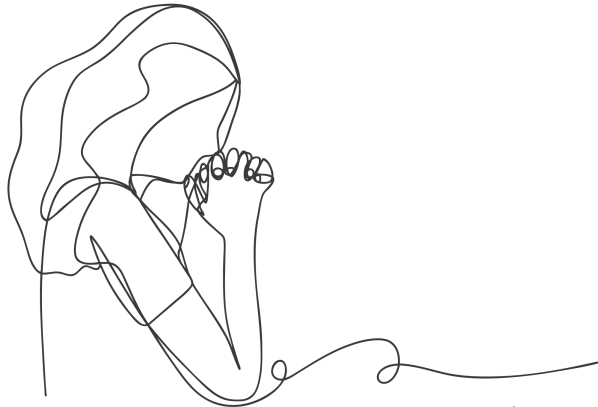
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Q. *With the weather heating up I start thinking about going to the beach. However, the beach is filled with temptations against maintaining purity. It seems that it is impossible for a good Catholic to enjoy the beach with all the possible sins that are present.*

A. This question often is posed when the weather gets warmer. I suggest you place the experience outside of a struggle between good and evil, purity and sin, and let it be what it is. A trip to the beach is meant to be enjoyed, not endured.

Q. *Is a person obliged, under the penalty of sin, to pray morning and evening prayer? Some authors say that prayer is a serious obligation.*

A. Prayer is not so much an obligation as an invitation. It is a spiritual practice and a spiritual discipline. You can take the practice up, put it aside for a while, or even choose something else. That is what a practice is. Also, it is a practice that is helpful in growing in your primary relationship with God, so it is a highly recommended.



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