

# Scrupulous ANONYMOUS

February 2022  
Vol. 59, No. 2



Scrupulous Anonymous  
One Liguori Drive  
Liguori, MO 63057  
[ScrupulousAnonymous.org](http://ScrupulousAnonymous.org)

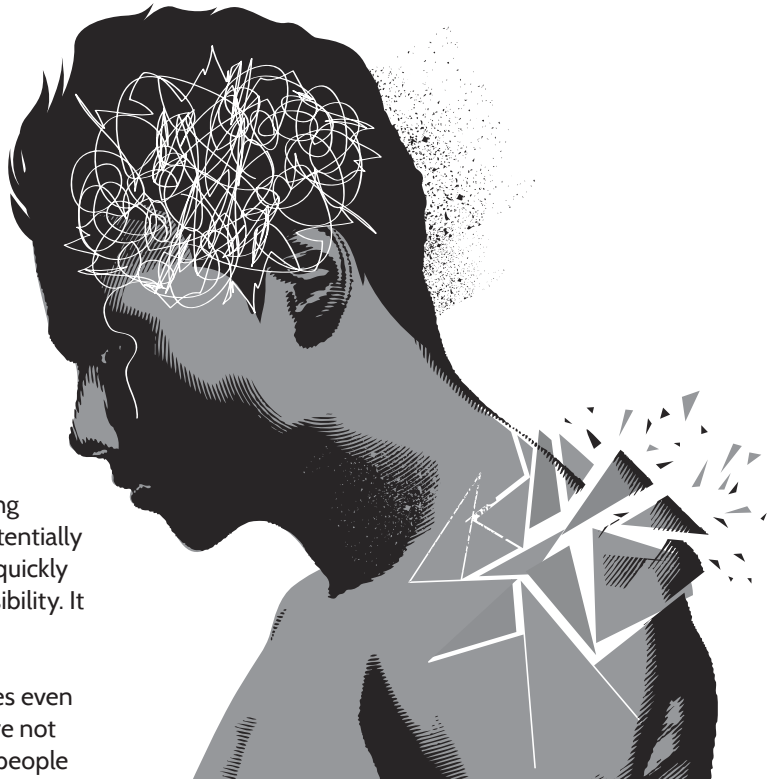
## Thoughts

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

**I**t is almost impossible to engage in a discussion about thoughts with a person with scrupulosity. It does not matter what kind of thoughts the discussion might include: intrusive, deliberate, creative, anxious, sexual, harmless, blasphemous, whatever. For a scrupulous person who struggles with her or his personal experience about thoughts, we can presume that the person believes the thought and the feeling associated with the thought is sinful or potentially sinful. As a result, discussions deteriorate quickly into ones about moral choice and responsibility. It is seemingly unavoidable.

Even though such conversations are unavoidable, quite sincere, and many times even intense, they are misdirected. Thoughts are not the issue, which is difficult for scrupulous people to understand and appreciate. The issue is anxiety. Everyone has thoughts, even Jesus did. Even some of his thoughts were intrusive.

Anxiety that is persistent and permanently a manifestation of the individual human experience of life is a disorder. As a disorder, it is the primary subject matter and focus in any conversation about feelings, emotions, thinking, or virtually any topic. Anxiety pretty much corners the entire scope of any conversation with a person who suffers from a severe case of it. Scrupulous people are anxious people.



SHUTTERSTOCK

To try to help a scrupulous person by steering him or her to the Bible, the catechism, the teachings of the saints, and any other seemingly useful avenue to help change their ideas about their thoughts is a dead end. This hopeless path leads to confusion and complicates any healthy process of growth and development. This is an unnecessary detour because, again I repeat, the issue is not thoughts. The issue is anxiety. The anxiety will keep scrupulous people from profiting from any

information used to help them change their minds about their thoughts.

It is absolutely a dead end to read anything in the spiritual library of the saints that discusses temptations, thoughts, or any related subject. Pious and theological writings—including the essential works of St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Alphonsus Liguori, St. Francis de Sales, or any other saint or religious author writing about these subjects—are not helpful. Each author is writing for the general public and is not considering the ravages of the anxiety disorder in their writings. They knew nothing about the disorder and could not address it. While there were, of course, anxious people in times past, anxiety was not understood to be a mental disorder until fairly recently. The sages of old simply did not understand that it should be considered and referred to as a disorder.

If scrupulous people desire to read or study something that will help encourage them about their thoughts, their time is better spent reading about anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and related subjects. For scrupulous people seeking answers about thoughts, religious material likely will be confusing, disorienting, and may trigger more anxious rumination.

Permit me to be as unambiguous as I can be as I address the sufferers: If you suffer with the anxiety disorder of religious scrupulosity, your thoughts may feel intrusive, unwelcomed, freely generated, and entertained, but they are never sinful. No matter how frightening. No matter how distasteful. No matter how they manifest themselves and are experienced, your thoughts are not sinful. They are not venial sins. They are not serious sins. They are not grave sins. They are not mortal sins. They are a manifestation rooted in the disorder that you suffer from. The disorder of anxiety.

The anxiety disorder of scrupulosity means that you are suffering from what moral theologians would define as “diminished capacity.” The

mental disorder of scrupulosity diminishes your capacity to make a truly free choice, or to enter a process of discernment, that is not tainted by your scrupulosity. No matter how hard you try and no matter how much you might convince yourself that you are responsible for your choice, your freedom and your responsibility are diminished. When scrupulosity is present and active, your freedom to choose is impaired and therefore the consequence of your choice is limited. When there is no freedom to choose, there is not the required “matter” for sin.

This understanding that I have presented is not a “get-out-of-jail-free card.” It is not a blank check to engage in any kind of behavior that you desire. I do not mean to say that a scrupulous person has no free will or freedom to choose. To those of you with scrupulosity, there are entire areas of your life that are not influenced by the disorder where freedom is possible. However, when you are dealing with the anxious focus and experience of your scrupulosity, freedom is diminished.

Intrusive thoughts are always influenced by scrupulosity and always engage the condition of diminished capacity.

Included in this explanation of thoughts would be behaviors that are commonly engaged and which are also subject to diminished capacity. I will specifically mention ruminating over past sins (the thoughts of what you once did or might have done or incompletely confessed), restitution (the thought that you need to fix and repair your past sins), and particularly sexual feelings and emotions (the thought that you somehow freely generated the thought that produced the emotion or the feeling).

As I have stated on many different occasions, scrupulosity is not primarily a spiritual problem. It is an anxiety disorder. It employs the language of religion to describe the feelings and emotions that are generated by the disorder. It is not about sin, it is about anxiety and fear. ☼

***The anxiety disorder of scrupulosity means that you are suffering from what moral theologians would define as “diminished capacity.”***

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# Fun Along “the Doubters’ Path”

**I**n exploring spiritual matters, people tend to become very serious. We might end up taking ourselves entirely too seriously. When that happens, no fun can be found on the spiritual journey.

Fun? Do you find that to be a discordant word in the midst of exploring spiritual matters? Most of us do. And yet play seems so healthy, doesn't it? And laughter always seems to have a way of putting matters into a better perspective. Thus, two key qualities surface to nurture on “the Doubters’ Path.” They are the capacity for fun and a healthy, self-effacing sense of humor.

Was Jesus Christ really such a serious person? I hope not, but there is a tendency to portray him in that manner. Granted, being crucified was no walk in the park, but prior to that event, people did seem to be drawn to him and enjoy his company. Do you like hanging out with people who are always serious and gloomy? The writers of the Gospels seem to have missed capturing the lighthearted side of Jesus. How different the story would read if, in addition to “Jesus wept,” we also were to read, “Jesus laughed.”

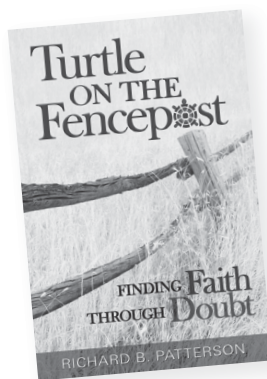
Is there any sign of a lighthearted Jesus to be found? I think so. Recall his encounter with children. The way the story reads is that children approached him. If you know children at all, then you know that children tend to avoid adults who seem all serious and somber. They are drawn to adults who laugh and play. They see such adults as approachable.

How does fun fit into your journey along “the Doubters’ Path”? What do you consider to be fun? Are you able to play, especially with

children? What makes you laugh? Who is your favorite comedian? Is it OK to laugh out loud in church?

These are important questions to address as part of the spiritual journey. Why? Because there is something special about the capacity to make others laugh, and there is something life-giving when we do laugh, especially when we laugh at ourselves. That need to laugh at ourselves extends to how we view the spiritual journey. As Teresa of Ávila once warned, “God save me from sober and serious saints!”

The issues confronted on a journey of questions and doubts are serious. But that seriousness in itself can be alluring. Viewing ourselves as weighed down with profound issues is ultimately an ego trip. Even in the desert, I am just one more lost fool trying to find my way. Laughter reminds me of that. ☼



Excerpted from *Turtle on the Fencepost*:

*Finding Faith through Doubt*

by Richard B. Patterson,

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# Mailbox

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**Q.** *Is it a sin to refer to transgender people with the pronoun they self-identify with? I have been counseled that using the pronoun they prefer affirms them in their sin of not living as God created them and that I should avoid doing so.*

**A.** It is not sinful to refer to transgender people with their preferred pronouns. It is respectful of their personhood as a child of God. Why would you freely choose to disrespect another person who is already struggling with something that is serious and difficult? Be compassionate. You can never make a mistake choosing compassion.

**Q.** *Is there a certain age at which people can choose to make decisions about their life and what is possible for them and what is not? For example, I am thinking about old age, when you determine you can just not attend Mass every Sunday.*

**A.** Yes, the certain age is called the age of reason. Generally, that age is when a person is eligible for the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation. It is also called maturity. To choose responsibly is the path and way for all Catholics, for all people. Discernment is a necessary process that everyone engages in throughout life.

## Announcement

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