

Same Question, Different Answers

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One of the most consistent complaints I hear from people who suffer with scrupulosity is that “it is impossible to get the same answer to the same question from different people.” This is a source of great consternation and often leads sufferers to high degrees of frustration, instead of the clarity and reassurance they seek.

The traditional answer to the complaint is a mantra sufferers have heard before numerous times: “That is why the consistent directive for scrupulous people is to limit their questions to one person, a single confessor who may be helpful.” Even though that is the traditional answer and is typically best for sufferers, they often feel it is unsatisfactory, flippant, or incomplete. Thus a fuller context may help.

First, remember that scrupulosity has often been identified as the “doubting disease.” It has this label for good reason. Even the most consistent and clarifying answer that could possibly be provided would not satisfy the sufferer. There would be another question. A plea for more clarity. That is the core experience of the

scrupulous condition. The answer itself is not the issue. Rather, it is that people with scrupulosity ask questions endlessly. Those with the condition never get satisfactory answers because the condition causes them to ask more questions.

Second, each experience of scrupulosity is unique. While the constant asking of questions is common, people experience the disorder differently. There are certainly shared experiences, but everyone is unique. The uniqueness results in sufferers reacting in their own way to answers. If one word seems out of place to the person asking the question or if the inflection feels wrong to him or her, the entire answer becomes

suspect. This sets up an impossible situation for anyone trying to answer a question. Sufferers, no one can answer a question in the way you may have rehearsed the expected response. Your respondent may know the answer, but no one can know how you expect the answer to be delivered.

This second point may sound almost absurd and unbelievable. I can only state that it is true, based on my many years of pastoral experience. It



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took me a long time to understand the dynamic. I used to believe I was making a mistake when I was not. I could not answer any question “correctly” because I could not be expected to know the exact wording that had been rehearsed. As I began to understand that no answer would be totally satisfactory, I began to comprehend the dynamic.

Another point to consider in seeking a helpful context is that the human condition and experience of communication is complex. It also is individual, personal. For example, no two actors will repeat the same lines in the same way. Or, listen to two eyewitnesses describe a car crash they both saw.

The descriptions will never match. That is the beauty *and* the limitation of human communication. The differences between descriptions become even more striking when you consider how people interpret what they hear. Again, no two interpretations will be alike.

It is even harder for two people to see eye to eye on the subjects of religion and religious practices and disciplines. The understanding and theological experience of one person may be totally different from those of another. The nuances can be numerous. Both people will answer honestly, with no attempt to deceive or misdirect, but each person’s theological starting point makes all the difference in the world.

For example, when a person is discussing Catholic moral teaching and perspective, it is essential to understand and accept that the Catholic tradition is itself nuanced by history, experience, conscience, and innumerable other factors. If your starting point is the theological viewpoint that is representative of an understanding of a well-ordered world, a hierarchical model, a perfect modeling on earth in the threefold order of Christendom, championed for centuries as the correct viewpoint of the world and forever codified in the Council of Trent, you

will have one starting point. If your framework is of a diversity of tradition and experience, accepting of a wider understanding of different cultures and experiences—respectful of the condition of humanity that experienced the Incarnate Word of God to form the people of God as presented in the documents of the Second Vatican Council—you will have a completely different starting point. To generalize, one perspective is primarily historical while the other is living, dynamic, and still under development.

For a scrupulous person, the divergence in these theological perspectives is often maddening.

It can be confusing and unclear, even though it is just a basic disagreement. The experience of asking a question and receiving an answer is gray, not black-and-white. It is “in between,” held in tension in a murky middle where reality is often experienced. If a scrupulous person can somehow limit his or her exposure to just one theological perspective, much of the anxiety in the questioning often can be reduced or experienced in a way that is less perplexing.

Accepting one theological perspective might seem helpful, but it may not be. Accepting one perspective

may comfort the sufferer, but it does little more than help him or her maintain a tolerable level of tension in the scrupulous condition and does little or nothing in the process of healing and learning how to effectively manage the scrupulous disorder.

I hope this explanation helps our readers with scrupulosity. It may produce more questions in search of answers. But I believe it may be a good beginning in explaining why the same question can be answered differently. When those with the scrupulous condition can learn about the disorder and the experience and then effectively apply what they learn to their own situation, they have taken a positive next step. ✨

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St. Alphonsus' Scrupulosity *(Part 2)*

Alphonsus Liguori's ordination to the priesthood brought with it a new and extensive field for his worries. The recitation of the Divine Office became a torture. He worried about distractions to the extent of believing that he had not complied with his obligations. He began to repeat the Office. Fr. Pagano intervened to forbid him from repeating what he had said. Fr. Pagano suggested he could recite the Office with another, only to find that Alphonsus was now worried that he was responsible for the shortcomings of his companion. The obligation that the virtue of charity imposes to point out to others the evil of their ways—a risky operation for anyone—worried him, until both Frs. Pagano and Tornì insisted that he was to disregard completely this aspect of the virtue. As far as Alphonsus was concerned, the obligation of fraternal correction simply did not exist.

His scruples assailed him at the most embarrassing moments—when he was in the middle of the formula of absolution in confession, when he was about to begin the celebration of Mass, at the consecration, at his own Communion.

Fr. Pagano made him enter in his notebook the instruction that once he put on the amice as he vested for the celebration of Mass, he was not to hesitate further. The simple entry reads, "so my confessor instructs me."

Before Masses, he worried whether he had broken his fast by accidentally swallowing water while washing. He purified the paten after the Communion interminably in case any particles of the sacred host escaped his diligence. Fr.

Pagano dealt with these areas by stating categorically that Alphonsus was never to omit the celebration of Mass no matter what sexual arousals occurred during the night, nor was he to seek confession beforehand; when purifying the paten, he was to leave most of the work to God's angels.

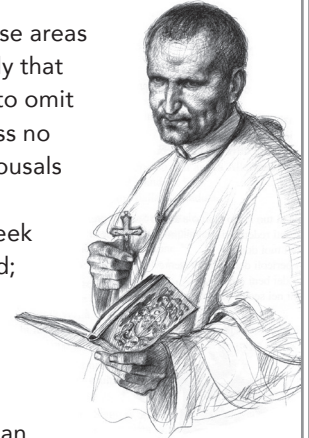
His hesitations began to extend themselves to normal everyday commitments. Fr. Pagano consequently had to lay down a definite program to cover every eventuality. Regarding his favorite devotion, the Forty Hours, Alphonsus was to attend each day for only an hour and a half of prayer.

Regarding his commitments to the apostolic mission, he was always to say yes when requested, but he was then to put the request to his confessor, who would give or refuse the final permission to undertake the engagement. When in doubt about the best course of action, he was to choose freely whichever course he wished, a solution that did not appeal to him and to which he objected. That, precisely, was his problem. ⚙

(Continued next month)

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Q. I have heard prominent Church teachers say that no one is in hell. I find this very disturbing and unsettling. How can someone say this kind of thing and still call themselves a Catholic?

A. The Church teaches there is a heaven and a hell, and that there is a particular and a general judgment that a person is subject to because of the decisions and choices the individual has made in his or her life. No one can be a Catholic and deny these truths. But the Church does not insist there is anything incorrect in a hope that all will be saved and that hell will be empty. There is a difference between a dogma and a hope.

Q. Is it a serious sin not to have penitential practice on Fridays? I understand that the Fridays of Lent are obligatory, but all Fridays are supposed to be penitential, too.

A. No, it is not a serious sin. The practice is an invitation to participate in a solid and useful spiritual practice and discipline. The penalty of sin need not be imposed when we bypass important, useful practices such as this one.



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