

The Near Occasion of Sin

FR. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSSR

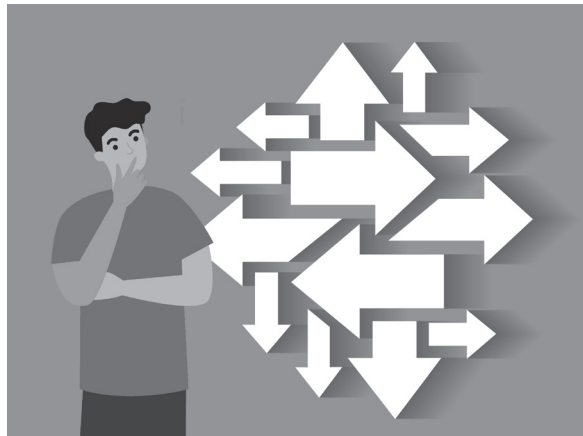
A consistent worry of people who suffer with the scrupulous condition is their understanding of sin. They worry how they may or may not be sinning, or if not sinning, placing themselves into situations where sin might be possible. Practice of the concept of “the near occasion of sin” may sound reasonable: Why not choose to avoid experiences that have the potential to tempt a person to sin? But if you experience scrupulosity and perceive that sin is omnipresent, avoiding the near occasion of sin often becomes confusing and problematic.

Moral theologians, when instructing the general population and not those who suffer with the scrupulous disorder, speak of two categories related to the near-occasion concept: “remote” and “proximate” occasions of sin. A remote occasion of sin may lead to sin, but the chances of sin being chosen and acted upon are unlikely. A proximate occasion of sin is one in which the experience usually

makes the possibility of choosing to engage in sin effortless because most obstacles have been removed and there is a clear path to engagement.

Here are examples of both categories: Most moral theologians would say that watching a movie with brief and occasional nudity might constitute a remote occasion of sin that could lead a person to a sin of impurity. Contrast this with a second choice, a proximate occasion of sin in which a person chooses to watch a pornographic movie. People who do not suffer from scrupulosity can clearly see that the second, proximate choice sets the stage for the sin of impurity, while the first, remote occasion of sin does not.

However, the distinction between remote and proximate occasions of sin is rarely clear for those with scrupulosity. They see both examples I described as proximate occasions for sin. Worse, the tendency to perceive the most harsh and severe sins possible enter their minds. A scrupulous person



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struggles to make a healthy judgment that their choice is not severe, often perceiving the presence of even the smallest possibility of sin to be enough to flip their thinking from “remote” to “proximate.”

Thus, considering the two types of near occasions of sin I cite is of little value in the lives of those with scrupulosity. Scrupulous people struggle with their own experience and understanding of the human condition, which includes the good, the bad, and the ordinary “gray” areas of life. But for scrupulous people, few gray or “good” experiences exist. “Bad” dominates.

If your perception of the human experience is predominantly severe, cautious, and/or suspicious of every human action as somehow tainted by sin, the concept of the “near occasion of sin” does not help you manage your life, especially if you have scrupulosity. If you perceive life as constantly being lived on the verge of catastrophic sin, if you experience the human condition as some kind of test of faithfulness to the plan of God and consistently judge that you are ultimately unfaithful, you will judge everything to be sinful, and you will seldom, if ever, perceive it in any other way. Your anxiety is unbearable, and no theological definition or explanation will make any improvement in your life.

If the problems I have described consume you, please do not use the concept of “the near occasion of sin” or its categories “remote” and “proximate” occasions of sin in your life. Lump



***Remember:
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theological struggle.
You have a spiritual
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them with all of the other useless distractions that are on your list of ideas to avoid: searching for clarity, seeking the ultimate definition, receiving the same and exact reassuring answer from two or more people, making a good confession of all your sins “perfectly” in number and in kind, and so on.

Remember: You do not have a theological struggle. You have a spiritual struggle with a mental disorder that is filling you with anxiety and fear. The hard truth is that you cannot think your way out of it or earn your way out of it. Something more is required to effectively confront the issue.

This newsletter has consistently discussed the basic steps that are required to engage scrupulosity in a healthy manner. The goal of each suggested strategy is to take the inner struggle and doubt out of the personal darkness of secrecy and bring it into the light. It is not effective to struggle quietly, speaking only in the darkness and an anonymous confessional, whispering your fears and sharing

your anxieties, and seeking reassurance. Such an approach leads to isolation, and the isolation reinforces your judgment of being alone, sentencing you to struggle silently with a disorder that is crippling. Find or continue getting help from a professional familiar with how to manage scrupulosity.

You may be tempted to think about the concept of the near occasion of sin as it applies to you, but it is important to let it go. You have other issues that are more important that require your attention and your effort. ✨

St. Alphonsus' Scrupulosity (Part 3)

The ministry of the confessional was an area where Alphonsus' scruples multiplied.

He found it difficult to transition from theory to practice: What was his responsibility in the area of questioning the penitent to secure a full confession? What questions were to be asked of different types of penitents, from children to adults, with little or no instruction in the theology of the sacrament? How was he to judge that the penitents were in the right frame of mind to receive absolution?

The theological formation he had received had much to do with his initial hesitations in confessional practice....When opinions for or against a course of action seemed of equal weight, the prevailing advice was to suspend judgment and not act without further consultation. If one had to make a decision, then it had to be for the safer course, which meant, in practice, the imposition of a further burden on the unfortunate penitent.

The result was that confessors, including the young Alphonsus, were faced on numerous occasions with the decision to defer or refuse absolution. This was logical in theory, frustrating in practice.

Further, Alphonsus was gradually coming to the conclusion that this confessional practice was out of harmony with the spirit of Christ and the gospel. Quite simply it did not work. He was learning from bitter experience and personal anguish of conscience that imposing obligations where there were none, deferring or refusing absolution as the virtual norm, could not be the right way of dealing with souls whom he wished to bring back

to the life of grace and the sacraments.

It was only at the cost of severe mental suffering that he was eventually able to lay aside the rigorous principles he had learned and devise others more in keeping with the spirit of the Father in the parable of the Prodigal Son.

His suffering of conscience was the price he had to pay as he evolved his own approach to dealing with sin and sinners. And yet, side by side with the problem of his own conscience went his mastery over the consciences and spiritual problems of others.

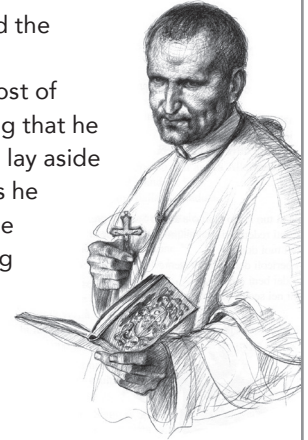
As the leading missionary of his day, he spent long hours in the confessional; bishops, priests, religious as well as laypeople sought his advice and direction. He showed special sympathy to those who, like himself, had experienced the agony of a scrupulous conscience. In his dealings with them he was able to draw on what he had been through himself.

His pamphlet, *Rest for Scrupulous Souls*, widely used throughout the Catholic world, has even in this century been regarded by psychiatrists as a masterpiece. ⚙

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ONE LIGUORI DRIVE, LIGUORI, MO 63057 • NEWSLETTER@LIGUORI.ORG

Q. Our priest told us it is a sin to send our child to a public school, saying that we cannot do it. He said we need to send her to a Catholic school or homeschool her. This doesn't sound right to me. Am I missing something?

A. It is your priest's opinion and preference, but it is not a rule and is not required of you as a parent to make this kind of choice. A public-school education is a responsible and discerning choice. What is important is that you remain engaged with your child and share with him or her the experience of the offspring's education. That is the most important part of situation.

Q. This might sound like a stupid question, but I am asking it in all seriousness. Is there ever a time when one Mass fulfills two obligations? I have in mind the Sunday obligation and a holy day of obligation that both occur on the same day.

A. This is not a stupid question. You bring up a situation that is not at all uncommon. When a holy day of obligation falls on a Sunday, your attendance at that Sunday Mass fulfills two obligations.



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