

An Unequal Exchange

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If a person has no real freedom to act, he or she cannot commit a mortal sin. Traditional and trustworthy Catholic moral theology accepts that the scrupulous condition effectively diminishes the capacity of the person who is suffering to make some decisions with the necessary freedom. Moral freedom is required to consent to an action. If the ability to consent is not present, there is limited responsibility for the action. This is particularly important to consider when examining mortal sin.

Catholic moral theology accepts six distinct conditions or hindrances that limit freedom to consent: fear, ignorance, passion, habit, violence, and mental illness. OCD/Scrupulosity is an example of mental illness, a disorder that limits the sufferer's ability to make a free decision in the specific areas of life that are affected by the scrupulous condition. This

"diminished capacity" does not apply to all areas of life. It is not a "free pass" to escape responsibility, but it does apply to the areas of decision-making that are impacted by the scrupulous condition. For most people who suffer with scrupulosity, these areas are easily defined and recognized, while other areas of decision-making seemingly are not affected by the condition.

Whenever the capacity to make a full, free, moral choice is diminished, another feeling often accompanies the scrupulous condition. If recognized and acted upon, it indicates that the scrupulous condition is likely at work. This feeling can become a useful tool in managing the disorder. That feeling is one of impending catastrophic consequences. Scrupulous people often believe they seldom commit venial sins. The scrupulous condition falsely identifies actions as mortal sins or something perhaps worse,



***If you have little ability
to make moral choices,
scrupulosity is likely at work,
and you falsely think
catastrophe is at hand.***



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sacrilegious, or blasphemous. This misperception and identification of moral responsibility is challenging. Freedom is diminished and fear is increased.

In truth, this is an unequal exchange. There is no benefit to the exchange, except for the disorder of scrupulosity. The person who is suffering does not benefit from the exchange in the least. They experience this uneven exchange profoundly. It seems that as freedom diminishes, the capacity for catastrophe fills the vacated space. This feeling that catastrophe is inevitable brings a certain cruelty with it. The person who suffers with the disorder has not freely consented to the exchange but most certainly suffers the full extent of the consequences.

This exchange feels effective and normal to scrupulous people. Their misdirected perception causes them to believe everyone understands life as they do. Sadly, scrupulous people are often surprised at how calm other people seem to be in comparison with how they feel when confronting “peril” and flirtation with the “inevitable eternal damnation.” It never occurs to them that people without the condition are not perceiving life in exactly the same manner. Their deeply felt experience and perception is patently false. People who do not suffer with scrupulosity have not perfected a skill that scrupulous people lack. The truth is that there is no peril, no inevitable catastrophe. The scrupulous condition is the cause of the perception.

As I referenced, the feeling of impending doom and gloom opens an opportunity to manage the disorder. If you recognize that the catastrophic feeling is erroneous—a warning sign—you may be able to head off judgment that you committed a serious sin.

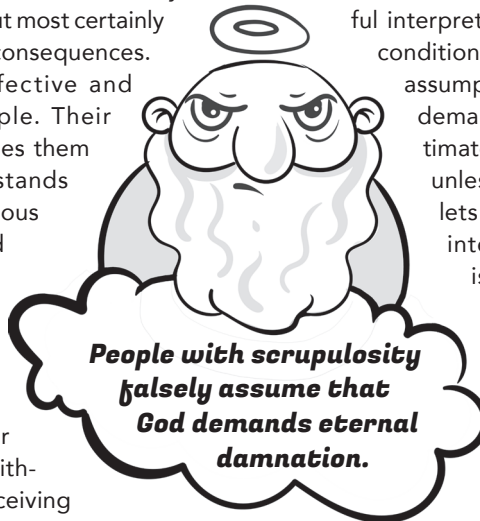
This feeling of increased catastrophe is the Achilles heel of the scrupulous condition, the exposed underbelly of the disorder. Catastrophe is completely out of context and inappropriate to whatever the action it is associated with. Therein lies the weakness

of the disorder, although it may not at first seem to be the case.

The catastrophic feelings that scrupulosity triggers never reflect reality. Life is simply not that perilous or frightful. There are certainly moments that are both and there are occasions when the identification of catastrophic possibility is appropriate, but it is most certainly not an everyday experience in normal living.

There is only one central catastrophe that is really at work in the scrupulous condition. The suffering is anchored in a false understanding but useful interpretation, at least to the scrupulous condition, of the image of God. The false assumption is that the judgment of God demands eternal damnation as the ultimate reality, the result of a life lived, unless a person is vigilant and never lets down his or her guard. When this interpretation and understanding is activated, scrupulosity makes some kind of sense. It is simply too much to risk, since eternal damnation is so permanent. It is eternal, and damnation after all. Who wants to risk that outcome?

The belief that eternal damnation is an ever-present reality and the conditioned hypersensitivity to this perception is the ultimate “diminished capacity” of scrupulosity. It diminishes the capacity of the human person to accept a God who loves, who forgives, and who desires above all else to be in relationship with his people. This false belief effectively reduces God to a bully who probes with delight to discover every potential weakness, offering “gifts” such as human sexuality, creative imagination, even feelings, not as gifts that help and build up the human spirit but rather as traps to catch the unaware human in a web of eternal punishment. When the scrupulous condition is at work, the sufferer believes this false God delights in what he has captured and casts another tortured soul into hell. It is perverse, but it feels real to one who suffers with the scrupulous condition. ☸



Beyond the Little-League Dad

A thirty-something father asked to speak with me. He said he was having doubts about whether he was doing a good enough job at being a dad. Instead of exploring what precipitated his doubts, I asked him, "Lee, what's your strongest positive experience of fatherhood?" He thought for a moment and replied, "I'm not sure if this is the best example but what comes to mind is a particular Little League game I took my youngest son to.

"I remember the day was overcast and humid. In fact, I was hoping it would rain to cool things off a bit. Alvin asked me if his team would automatically lose the game if it rained. He hadn't been playing well all season. I was afraid he might be looking for an excuse, so I reminded him about the difference between forfeiting a game because of a no-show and rescheduling it due to bad weather. I told him all he had to do was play his best. I wanted him to learn values like good sportsmanship, team spirit, being responsible, and not looking for an easy way out or running away from commitments. He was only nine. Maybe I was expecting too much, I don't know.

"Anyway, midway through the game, the rain came down in buckets. The infield got soggy and his team lost. But it's what happened after the game that I'll never forget.

"I had parked our van on the grass at the far end of the field and a visitor had parked about three car lengths in front of me. He was slightly older than the other parents and he had to use a wheelchair. After the heavy rain, he must have struggled to get back to his vehicle because I remember seeing two deep ruts in the ground that were obviously the tracks left behind by his wheelchair. As Alvin and I walked by his car, I noticed that he had managed to fold his chair

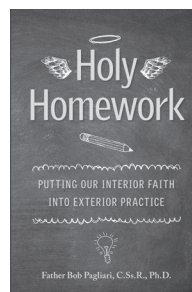
into the back seat. But somehow, as he was trying to maneuver himself into the front seat, his feet got crossed and twisted together. So there he was, struggling to get his own two feet apart, but he couldn't. They were all tangled up and dangling outside his car door.

"The poor guy looked so embarrassed when I approached him, and I felt pretty awkward myself because I had never knelt down in the mud before to untangle someone else's feet for them. He was so grateful. He even offered me some money afterward, but I wouldn't take anything. I couldn't."

I could see Lee was reliving the experience as his eyes filled up. "I got into the van and I started to cry. I kept telling myself I shouldn't be crying in front of my boy but I couldn't help it."

I waited until Lee regained his composure to ask, "Do you know what your tears are about right now?" "Yes," he whispered, "that I'm grateful for my own health; that I'm a good person and a strong man but also very caring; and that my son was there to see all that in me. At least I hope he thinks about me that way."

To all the dads who ever doubted their paternal advice, chauffeured kids to games so they could learn the deeper values of life, knelt in the muddy waters of trying to untangle other peoples' problems or stood up tall with watery eyes full of compassion. Happy Father's Day. 🌟



Adapted from *Holy Homework: Putting Our Interior Faith Into Exterior Practice* by Fr. Bob Pagliari, C.Ss.R. (Liguori Publications, 2022), 828638. To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521.

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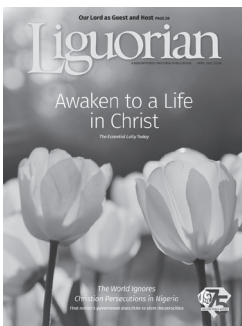
Q. My unmarried daughter wants to borrow my lawn chairs to go camping with her boyfriend. Giving her the chairs is cooperation with mortal sin. Must I refuse her request?

A. Permitting your daughter to borrow your lawn chairs is a simple act of sharing between a parent and child. Such sharing is not fraught with the danger of sin. Imposing your scrupulous condition on another person, in this instance a person you love, risks unreasonableness and rigidity. Give your daughter the lawn chairs.

Q. When I drive, I often am convinced that I have hit something that requires me to stop. I choose to keep going because I convince myself that this is an unwarranted fear. Is this a sin?

A. It is never a sin to choose a healthy response over an unhealthy one. While the choice may trigger fear and/or anxiety, feelings seldom are a good measurement of moral life and responsibility. Continue to make the healthy choice.

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